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SEAN GREGORY



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# MURDER MAKES THE CORPSE

BY

SEAN GREGORY

*Author of*

"MURDER BANGS A BIG DRUM," "MURDER IS TOO PERMANENT," etc.

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LIEUTENANT PAUL GRIMSDYKE flicked the buff police dossier across the desk at me. The seriousness of his voice belied the warmth behind his friendly eyes.

"Another one," he remarked, scoring the thin paper with his forefinger. "Getting so it's not safe to die in this town any longer."

I followed the edge of his finger-nail, which underlined the brief comment from the Commissioner. "Four cases of grave robbery in twelve months. Why?" The Commissioner did not waste words. His enemies said he did not have many to waste.

"Maybe someone's started a wax museum," I suggested lightly. It didn't register with Grimsdyke. He looked blank at me. I said: "Mystery of the Wax Museum—remember? An oldie. Just been re-made in 3-D."

The Lieutenant grasped the point. He shook his head. "Never go to the movies—haven't time. But my wife told me about it. Couldn't be done. How'd you stop decomposition?"

"Don't ask me," I said. "You're the ace detective. I'm just a press agent."

"The operative word in that sentence is 'just,'" Grimsdyke commented. He reached for his hat. "I promised my wife I'd be home early to-night. Buy you a drink on the way?"

"You've made a sale," I agreed. We went downstairs together, out of the steam-heat of the police building into the deceptive mildness of the Hollywood night air. I had an evening to kill, and Grimsdyke was pleasant company. Susan had gone home

to Middleburg to pay a pre-Christmas visit to an aunt and would not be back for five or six days, so I was without evening company.

Grimsdyke and I turned left out of the building, heading for Joe's Five-Star Bar, which was almost next door and the recognised "branch office" of the police headquarters. Joe himself was behind the bar, fat and benevolent and oozing the righteous charm that could only come from many years of serving policemen with drinks. I said I would have my usual orange juice and Grimsdyke ordered a beer. We sat and drank, talking of this and that, and then he turned to the grave robberies again.

He held the beer before his eyes and looked at the light through it, narrowing his eyes to catch the colour. "Y'know," he said reflectively, "there must be a reason why somebody steals corpses. We just can't see it, that's all."

"Not necessarily," I said. "It could be a lunatic. Nuts do the oddest things."

The Lieutenant shook his head. "If it were a nut, we'd likely have found the bodies again. The odd thing about these cases is that the bodies have just disappeared." He snapped his fingers. "Into thin air."

"You're presupposing that someone had a definite plan in stealing the bodies," I asked. "Like those body snatchers—what were their names?—Burke and Hare?"

"They stole bodies to sell to medical schools, didn't they?" Grimsdyke passed me a cigarette. "That's the type of thing I mean. Someone who wanted corpses."

I shivered. "The only thing I know that wants a corpse is a worm. Let's change the subject before we see spooks in the mirror."

That was the end of the conversation so far as the missing bodies were concerned. I bought Grimsdyke a drink, and then I drove him to the corner of his street, and I went back to my apartment to plan the rest of the evening on my own. I had a bath and changed and decided to go downtown and eat at Mike Romanoff's. Just as I was going out, however, the telephone shrilled and I returned to answer it.

"Mack Regan," I told the caller, thinking it might be long-distance from Middleburg. But the woman who answered was not the telephone operator.

"You are Mackenzie Regan, the press agent?" she asked. Her voice had a lilt about it. Somehow I thought of muted violins. When I repeated my name, she went on: "I am interested in obtaining your services. Do you think you can help me?"

"Tell me more about your problem and I'll say whether I

can or not," I answered. I felt like a radio aunt. "But don't you think this would wait until the morning, when you can see me in my office?"

"No. I want to see you to-night—immediately, if possible." This time there was a note of urgency in the violins. "I can't wait—there may not be time . . ."

It was as good a way as any of spending a dull evening. I said: "All right. Why not have dinner with me at Romanoff's? I'm going there right away. Join me when you're ready." I didn't see what all the hurry was about, but there was no harm in finding out. I added: "What's your name, by the way?"

"Kay Ransome. I'm a singer." She sounded as though she hoped it might mean something to me, so I lied back at her.

"Sure, I've heard of you. Well, meet me at Romanoff's as soon as you can." We said good-bye and I hung up. Even her words of farewell seemed hurried, as though time were catching up on her.

So I went to Romanoff's, and I sat at a table for two and eventually I ate a dinner for one, and no one joined me. No Kay Ransome. I had some of Mike's *sole bonne femme* and a bottle of Barsac, and eventually I decided I had been stood up, so I went out to find my Plymouth. A boy appeared with the morning editions, and it was then I found Kay Ransome.

Her picture was on the front page with a three-paragraph story alongside it. There had obviously been just enough time to pull something less sensational out of the paper and drop in the picture and the brief story.

"ACTRESS FOUND DEAD: KAY RANSOME, TV SINGER, SHOT IN APARTMENT." Those were the headlines. She had been killed by a .38 calibre bullet at close range. Lieutenant Wilson of Homicide said it was murder and an arrest was expected shortly. I thought he was over-optimistic and turned my attention to the photograph.

Kay Ransome had been a lovely girl—no doubt about that. Soft dark hair and eyes that could have won her a kingdom. I wondered why she had sounded so anxious on the telephone. The whole thing made me a little melancholy. I drove home and tried to call Susan in Middleburg to cheer me up, but the long-distance operator said she couldn't be found, so I went to bed with the radio on and eventually fell asleep to dream fitfully of a pair of large brown eyes that followed me everywhere I turned.

I didn't feel a great deal more cheerful when I went to the office next morning. There was a letter from Susan saying she would be another two or three days because her aunt had a cold, but she would be back in time for Christmas and not to worry. The rest of the mail was routine, which meant it was as dull as yellow ochre.

I lit a cigarette and sat with my feet up on the desk, looking out of the window. A sign across the street blazed at me: **ONLY EIGHT MORE SHOPPING DAYS TO CHRISTMAS.** Somehow it made me feel a good deal older than yesterday, when it had announced nine more days.

The door of the outer office opened and closed, so I got to my feet and went across the room to take a look. Then I knew I should have gone to sleep earlier the previous night, because Kay Ransome stood in the outer office staring at me.

I must have looked like a goop. I certainly felt like one. She was flesh and blood all right. The rise and fall of her jacket—she had obviously run up the stairs instead of taking the elevator—showed that.

She said: "You're Mack Regan?"

That gave away the secret. This girl looked like the Kay Ransome of the photograph, but her voice was softer, much younger. I said: "Wait a minute. Aren't you——?"

She interrupted me. "My name's Ransome. Lynne Ransome."

I suppose I showed my relief. She picked me up on it. "You thought I was—Kay. That means you knew her."

I said: "Come on in and sit down. No, I didn't know her. She phoned me last night. I suppose you must be a sister—you look so much like her."

The girl sat down in the chair across from my desk, keeping her legs straight, her knees close together. She smoothed her skirt. She wore a black two-piece suit with a white nylon blouse showing at the throat. She had the same dark hair and enormous eyes as her sister, but now I had time to look at her, I realised she was much younger—about twenty-two, I guessed.

She said: "Kay was my older sister."

The statement didn't seem to call for any remark from me. I stubbed out my cigarette and waited.

The girl went on: "You say she phoned you last night. Why?"

"She wanted to hire me. I'm a press agent. She asked me to meet her last night, so I arranged to be at Romanoff's. She didn't turn up. When I bought a paper I read what had happened."

She nodded. "You've told the police about this?"

"No. It didn't seem anyone's business but my own," I said. I thought it was my turn to ask a question. "What made you come to me?"

"Kay phoned me last night, too. She said she was going to talk to you. She thought you could help her."

That sounded reasonable. "If she needed a press agent, I might have been able to do something."

Lynne Ransome smoothed her skirt again. She had fine, nervous hands. There was an engagement ring on the third finger of her left hand—a small solitaire diamond. She said: "It wasn't as a press agent she wanted to consult you—at least, that's the impression I got. My sister was in some kind of trouble—she sounded frightened when she talked to me. She said you knew the police. She seemed to think you could straighten out the trouble she was in."

I said: "I'm a press agent—not a private detective. I couldn't have helped your sister." It was cruel, but I didn't want to encourage false hopes.

Her face fell. "Then you can't help me?"

"If you want a press agent—yes."

"I don't want a press agent." She leaned forward. "Mr. Regan, my sister was in trouble—I don't know what kind of trouble, but I knew she was. Someone murdered her last night and I want to find out who it was." She fiddled with her purse and a thin roll of bills fell on to my desk. There was about 300 dollars there, I reckoned. "I haven't much money, but I'll pay what I have if you'll help me."

She was in earnest, a worried, rather pathetic little figure. But I couldn't deceive her. I shook my head. "Miss Ransome, I'm not a private detective. In any case, the police will find your sister's murderer—that's their job." I pushed the bills towards her. "Keep your money and let the police earn their pay."

She said: "Oh." It was a flat, unhappy little sound. I felt as though I had kicked a homeless kitten. I tried to change the subject. "Where do you work?"

"I'm a secretary with the Californian State Insurance Company. Why?"

I didn't know why I had asked, so I switched again. "Look, why don't you write down your address and if I get to know anything from the police, I'll call you. Promise."

"You will?" She perked up immediately. Seizing my desk

pencil, she scribbled something on the blotter. Then she stood up. "It's really very kind of you. I do appreciate it."

That was the way we left it. She said good-bye and I showed her out of the office. Then I went back to my desk again and lit another cigarette and called Lieutenant Grimsdyke. I told him what had happened about Kay Ransome calling me the previous night and how her sister had been to see me.

"Any leads?" I asked, knowing he would tell me only what he wanted to tell and no more.

"Wilson says he expects an early arrest," Grimsdyke replied.

I said: "This is Mack Regan. Let's not play hard-to-get, chum."

His chuckle vibrated the phone. "Between you and me, not a damn' thing. No particular friends, no enemies. She wasn't entangled anywhere, she didn't smoke reefers, she didn't play with any rough boys. For a singer, she lived well, but that doesn't mean much. Someone just walked in and shot her. Nobody saw it happen, nobody heard anything."

I said: "It's a hard life, Grimmie. Let me know if anything develops. I'd like to help the kid." We spattered around some more and then hung up, and I leaned back again and relaxed. I wondered whether to go out to the studios where I had a comedian making a picture. But the phone rang.

The man's voice was low and solemn. I thought he sounded as I had always imagined Uriah Heep to sound. He said: "Mr. Regan? This is Alvar Domonici. I am interested in discussing business with you."

"That's nice of you," I agreed. "What business are you in, Mr. Domonici?"

His voice practically dropped into a minor key. "I am the proprietor of Peaceful Acres. No doubt that will explain matters to you?"

The name jelled. I could almost see the hoardings on the way out of town: "Peaceful Acres—The Land of Perfect Rest." The place where you could lay your bones in anything from a deal box to a silver casket studded with diamonds. The home of the brave. Boot Hill in a twentieth-century setting. *Requiescat in pace*—at prices to suit everyone's pocket.

I said: "Yes, I know you. When do you want to come to my office?"

He corrected me gently. "I should prefer it if you came to visit me. Do you mind?" The unctuous voice paused. "Perhaps this afternoon—say about three o'clock?"



I didn't want him to think I was that easy. "Make it three-thirty," I said. We agreed on that, and once again I hung up. I thought it was rather funny. Mack Regan—press agent to a mortician. The dead man's PRO. I lit another cigarette and chuckled to myself. Then I shut up the office and went to the studios. I felt I needed some contact with the living . . . if you could call my comedian alive.

It was exactly three-thirty by my wristwatch when I turned the nose of the car through the marble gateway beside which a small bronze plaque proclaimed "Peaceful Acres." I don't know what I expected—gravestones, maybe. An odd coffin or two lying around. Perhaps even a couple of skulls thrown in for good measure.

But "Peaceful Acres" was more like a park, the sort of park you associate with a rich landowner's house in the eighteenth century. As I drove through the long avenue of silver birches to the black and white colonial-style mansion set in a miniature valley of thick, rolling grass, I got the impression that artful minxes in crinolines, hiding laughing eyes behind their fans, lurked in the shadows. Just an impression.

I pulled the car into the parking lot beside the house and mounted the clean white steps to the front door. A dignified negro with crisp hair opened in response to my knock, and I stated my business. He was one of those negroes who looked left over from the casting of "Gone With The Wind." He showed me into a green and gold morning room, stuffed with green and gold brocaded furniture and great, wallowing drapes at the french windows. On the mantelshelf a gilt ormolu clock chimed once, delicately, like a teaspoon cracking a silver eggshell.

Alvar Domonici came in then. I knew it was he without being told. He was about five feet two, wearing a morning tail-coat and striped pants, with the most beautifully-tied grey cravat I have ever seen. His pointed black shoes gleamed with someone's effort—but not his own. They were only slightly glossier than his smooth black hair. He came straight to the point.

"I am Alvar Domonici," he said, and his voice sounded even soapier than it had done over the phone. "I am happy to meet you, Mr. Regan, and I think we shall have a pleasant association together." He waved a hand airily around to take in the room. "This is a beautiful setting, don't you agree? Everything at Peaceful Acres is beautiful. The last resting place of one's loved ones should be in as perfect a spot as man, combining with nature, can devise." His smile flashed at me. He had little, pearl-gleaming teeth. I disliked him on sight.

I said: "Mr. Domonici, I am not sure whether——"

He cut me short with a gesture. "Please—please—do not say you are not sure whether you wish to handle this account. I know of your work, Mr. Regan. I am confident you can help me."

"Exactly what do you want me to do?" I felt like a cigarette but wondered whether I should be thrown out for disrespect.

He took a step or two away, whirled round, confronted me. "Our advertising is good. But in this—work—one needs more than advertising. I want people to understand the value of Peaceful Acres—the value to humanity. This is a great institution. Many famous people lie here in their last sleep. I think the story of Peaceful Acres should be given to the world."

I nodded. I was on to him now. This time I put on my best consultant manner and told him, gravely, "As I see it, Mr. Domonici, a book should be written about Peaceful Acres. I should like to spend some time delving into the facts about the place, discovering the human stories behind it. Then, perhaps, under your name, we could work together on a book. That would be a start. Does it appeal to you?"

I knew the answer to it before the question was asked. There isn't anyone who doesn't believe they could write a book, with just a *little* help. He was practically ready to embalm me free of charge. "An excellent idea. I should be only too happy to collaborate with you." He cocked his head on one side. "No doubt there would be little difficulty in having such a work published?"

"Provided the material is good, we can find a publisher," I replied. I knew at least three who could be persuaded, by the promise of a slight subsidy, to handle it.

"Good." He rubbed his hands together. "The sooner we start, the better. Now, as to your fee. . . ." He didn't let me suggest anything. "Would a retainer of one hundred dollars a week be suitable? With, of course, suitable recompense for every mention of Peaceful Acres in the newspapers, the radio, and so on? I should think about ten dollars for each—what would you call it?—editorial reference."

He intrigued me. Alvar Domonici was not such a fool as he appeared at first. He had gone into the costs and knew exactly what the job was worth.

I agreed with him. From then on it was a matter of finishing the interview and getting out. We arranged to meet the following day, when he could show me round Peaceful Acres. Then I was out in the pleasant December air again and wondering whether

I had been really wise in taking on the job. And I suddenly realised there had been no option. Alvar Domonici had that hypnotic type of smooth salesmanship which could have talked me into handling the whole thing for a ten-spot a week if he had really tried. At the thought I disliked him even more.

I drove back to town in a somewhat chastened frame of mind. If Domonici could handle me as simply in a first interview, working for him might not be a picnic. It's a good rule in public relations never to let the client run you too much. Otherwise he's liable to get the bit between his teeth and run you ragged.

As I let the elevator doors close behind me at the second floor (I'm not the type to run up two flights of stairs) I saw the girl again. I suppose I should have expected it. Lynne Ransome wasn't the type to give up that easily. She was walking away from my locked office door with her head down, dejection splashed all over her.

When she caught sight of me, her eyes brightened immediately. She came running down the corridor, almost stumbling in her eagerness.

"Mr. Regan, am I glad I found you! I think I've hit on something."

I nearly groaned, but I caught her arm and propelled her towards the office. "All right, let's go inside and you can tell me all about it."

She didn't wait to get settled into the private office. "Mr. Regan—I've been going through Kay's safe-deposit box. The lawyers arranged it all for me. I found—oh, all sorts of things. That's what I want to talk to you about." She was already emptying her purse on my desk.

What she emptied nearly made my eyes leave their sockets. The most important item was a neatly stacked pile of bills as thick as an omnibus library book. I touched them almost reverently, then thumbed through the lot as though I was handling radium. Every single bill was for a thousand dollars. And there must have been at least a hundred in the stack.

"Look at this." Lynne Ransome jogged my arm. She pushed a photograph under my nose. It was a candid camera shot of Kay Ransome with a man. He had his arm around her and she was looking up into his eyes with genuine devotion.

The man's face struck a chord in my memory. I knew it from somewhere, but I couldn't say where. I turned the picture over and read what was written on the back: "To Kay darling, with all my love for a lifetime—Hal."

It was the signature that plucked at that chord again. I said: "Miss Ransome, did your sister ever live in San Francisco?"

"But of course." She seemed to take my question for granted. "That was where Kay got her start. She sang in a restaurant there—the Red Domino, it was called."

"A man called Hal Greevey owned the Red Domino," I said. "Hal Greevey—the racketeer who ran half of 'Frisco. The big boy—the boy with the pull."

She nodded. "I've heard of him. But I didn't know he owned that restaurant. Do you think——?"

I scored under the name on the back of the photograph. "That's Hal Greevey—I remember the face. He died about a year ago—a heart attack or something. If he hadn't, the Federal Bureau of Investigation were going to pull him in for income tax frauds."

"Then my sister must have——" Her eyes were enormous. "I didn't connect the name with . . . him." She reached out and touched the pile of money, then drew her fingers back as though it burned her. "She must have got this money from him. I couldn't see how she managed to save this sum."

I said: "That's probably it. But don't think too harshly, Miss Ransome. Even the nicest girls can fall for a racketeer." I picked up the stack of bills. "If I guess right, he passed on this money to her for safe keeping when the tax boys got busy, and then he died and your sister didn't know what to do with it."

Her voice was almost a whisper. "But what shall we do with it?"

"Give it to the police, I suppose," I said. I could have made a dozen other suggestions but they would all have got me into trouble with the law. "They'll know what to do with it."

The voice said: "I know better than the cops what to do with it, pal."

It was a deep grating voice, reminiscent of the Bowery Boys at their boweriest. For a moment I wondered why Lynne Ransome was trying to talk like Leo Gorcey, and then I realised it wasn't Lynne talking and I looked up and straight down the open-for-business end of a .38 Smith and Wesson. The other end of the cannon was tucked into a knobby fist, and the fist led up an arm clad in blue worsted and by way of broad shoulders and a thick neck to the kind of face that even a mother couldn't learn to love.

I said: "Oh, no."

The character shook his head reproachfully. "Oh yes, pal. Let's have the mazuma and we'll forget we ever met, eh?"

He stretched out his other hand over Lynne Ransome's shoulder

at the precise moment she turned her head and gave a little squeal. As he gathered the money into his fist he added: "Let's keep it quiet, gorgeous, shall we?" His piggy eyes flashed a warning at me. "Both hands flat on the desk, pal. At this range I couldn't help blowing you apart."

I took his word for it. My hands pressed firmly into the desk blotter. I said: "This a casual stickup or did you follow Miss Ransome?"

The notes were neatly gathered up and transferred to his pocket. "Casual as all hell, pal. I just know press agents always carry this dough."

What made me do it I don't know, but I did a fool thing. "Kay Ransome was shot with a .38," I said.

Luckily for me he didn't rise. Yellow showed momentarily in the corners of his eyes. He said: "Not with this .38, she wasn't. I ain't a dame killer." He thought a moment and went on: "Talking out of turn like that is apt to get you in bad, pal."

"Consider it unsaid," I told him. I had wondered if I could get him talking, but he didn't give me any further chance. He began to back out of the office, still keeping the gun aimed stylishly at my throat. Lynne Ransome stayed still, her head half turned to watch him.

When he reached the door he said: "I'm going out of here in one piece and I don't aim to be followed. When you hear the elevator move you can start stirring." The gun jerked at the phone and back to me. "Don't try calling the cops. I cut your phone wires."

Then he was gone and the door banged behind him. Lynne Ransome started to move and I leaned across the desk quickly and pushed her back in her chair.

She asked: "But aren't you going after him?"

I said: "I want to stay a live press agent, not be a dead hero." The elevator doors grated open and a moment later I heard the whine of the motor. I opened the middle drawer of my desk and found my binoculars, a pair of Zeiss I had won at poker from a British major who had acquired them in ETO. They come in handy at the track.

I stepped to the window, pushed it up and perched on the sill so that I could survey the street below. As I had expected, the Bowery Boy strolled across the sidewalk and into a parked sedan that shot away like an Indianapolis entry. But not so fast I couldn't focus the glasses on it. They told me what I wanted to know: it was a Hudson, license plate IS 69417.

The girl stood up. She looked annoyed. "Well!" she said. In woman-talk that kind of monosyllable usually means *you sonovabitch*. She added: "You let him get away with all that money and you didn't even lift a finger!"

"Maybe I should have growled at him?" I suggested. "I'm allergic to bullets." I picked up the phone, heard nothing, remembered it was dead, and said: "Look, Miss Ransome, that was very carefully planned. Someone knew you'd been to your sister's safe deposit box, they knew what you'd be carrying and they wanted it back. So we'll check a little." I took her arm. "I'm going out to have a coffee and make a phone call. Care to join me?"

She suddenly looked triumphant. "Anyway, you've got to help me now. The money was stolen in your office, so it's your responsibility."

I didn't follow her reasoning. But we went downstairs and along the block to a restaurant, and once I had her at a table I went to the pay-phone and called a man I knew in the Licence Bureau. I waited while he checked; it didn't take long, and presently he came back to report his findings.

"There's a black Hudson sedan registered in the name of Laurence Kinroy," he told me. "Address is Peaceful Acres, Westwood Drive, Bel Air."

I gulped. "Peaceful Acres?"

"That's right. But he ain't dead. Kinroy's secretary of the company that owns Peaceful Acres. All their cars are Hudsons."

I thanked him and hung up, thinking about this new set-up. Then I thought some more and decided to chance a call to Domonici. He sounded thankful when I got through to him.

"I have been calling your office for the past hour, Mr. Regan but the number appears to be out of order," he said quickly. "There has been a new development. I must apologise for the trouble I have caused you, but I am afraid the arrangement we discussed will not now apply."

That was another surprise. I said: "In English, you mean I'm not hired?"

"You could put it that way," he answered, smooth as ever. Or did I detect a slight fluster behind the smoothness this time? "Please accept my apologies. I am sure you will understand."

"It happens all the time," I said. "Just let me ask one question, Mr. Domonici." His "of course" did sound a trifle flustered. I went on: "Does your company own a black Hudson sedan, license plate IS 69417?"

"All our cars are Hudsons," he replied, making it sound like an advertisement. "That could be one of ours."

"There's no 'could be'," I told him. "It's one of your cars. I just wanted to tell you it's keeping bad company. A big character with a large revolver is using it right now, and he's just lifted a hundred thousand dollars from my office. *Good evening, Mr. Domonici.*"

I went back to the table feeling a great deal better. The feeling evaporated as quickly as it came. Lynne Ransome had gone.

The apartment seemed cold when I reached there about three hours later, after a meal at Romanoff's and a drift around town, meeting several contacts. I thought I would make some coffee and go to bed early. Then the phone rang.

Domonici's smooth voice was at the other end of the line. Only this time the smoothness was definitely overlaid by something else.

He said: "Mr. Regan, I must talk with you. Can we meet somewhere?"

"Right now?" I asked. If he had changed his mind, it was a peculiar way of doing business. But I had the feeling there was more to it than that.

"As quickly as you can," he replied. "I—I need your help." He seemed to want to say more, then stopped.

"You can come to my apartment," I suggested, wondering how he would take that.

He reacted as I had expected. "No. I would rather meet you somewhere else. Will you come to Peaceful Acres? I will be at the main gate."

I didn't like it, but curiosity is my chief failing. I told him I would be there in three-quarters of an hour. Then I tried Lynne Ransome's number, but there was no reply. So I went back to the Plymouth and headed for Bel Air once again.

If Peaceful Acres had looked calm and beautiful and almost inviting in the early afternoon, it certainly didn't look so charming now. Some of it was probably my own imagination, no doubt, but a good deal was caused by the wind that had sprung up and was now whining eerily through the silver birches. There was a half-moon, too, high above the scudding clouds, and the avenue through the rolling parklands seemed like one of those off-perspective effects you get in the best nightmares. I'm no drinker—orange juice is my tipple, because drinking hard liquor just makes

me sick—but this was one time I could have used a stiff double brandy.

I stopped at the gates and switched off the motor, listening to the trees playing their haunting music. I lit a cigarette, wishing Domonici was in some less spooky business like making tables. It was cold and gloomy and about as unpleasant as anything could be.

Presently I saw lights appear over the hill at the end of the long drive. If they'd been jack-o'-lanterns I should not have been at all surprised. But they were definitely the lights of an automobile, and even in my supercharged state of nervousness I couldn't recognise them for anything else.

The car pulled up just inside the gates, reversed smartly and waited, its motor idling. Domonici got out of the passenger seat, quite slowly and almost reluctantly, it seemed. The car was a black Hudson, similar to the one the Bowery Boy had used earlier in the day.

Domonici came to the gates, opened them and peered out at my Plymouth.

"Is that you, Mr. Regan?" he called. He didn't approach nearer than four or five feet. I stuck my head out of the window and assured him it wasn't Adolf Hitler.

He called again: "Please follow me back to the house. We can talk there." Then he bolted back to the Hudson and it slid away fast. I swung after him, tailing his rear lights through the ghostly avenue.

Outside the mansion the Hudson slipped neatly into the parking lot while I left my car at the front entrance. Domonici was by my side as I got out. The front door gaped open. Somehow it reminded me of the entrance to a tomb.

Over by the Hudson a bulky, tough-looking chauffeur leaned against a fender and picked his teeth thoughtfully.

Domonici said: "This way, please." He darted inside, moving jerkily into the morning-room. This time we were not alone.

The third man looked very successful. He was big and broad and so closely-shaven his skin positively glowed. The gardenia he wore in the lapel of his double-breasted dinner jacket appeared to have been cut from a hothouse bloom less than five minutes before. He leaned against the mantelshelf, right hand in his jacket pocket, with just the thumb showing. It was the right pose.

Domonici said: "Mr. Regan, this is Mr. Kinroy. He is the secretary of our company."



I said nothing. Kinroy came forward, extracting his hand from his pocket with the kind of motion that would have made Grover Whalen speechless with envy. He took my hand carefully, gripping it with just the right amount of confident firmness.

"I am very happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Regan," he said. His voice matched his clothes—deep, cultivated, well-groomed.

"Now we're all happy," I remarked, disentangling my hand. I turned on Domonici. "Is this why you dragged me out here at this time of night—to be social with Mr. Kinroy?"

The little man shook his head. He had lost all his smoothness. He was very frightened. "No. We wanted to tell you something."

"Explain something would be the better phrase," said Kinroy pleasantly, with the accent on the *explain*. "I understand you thought you saw one of our cars this afternoon . . . that is what we wanted to discuss."

I said: "Licence plate IS 69417. That's one of your cars."

"Cigarette?" A platinum case flashed under my nose. Kinroy nodded. "Ah, yes, that would be one of ours—we use nothing but Hudsons." He lit my cigarette from a small gold lighter, then went on: "It's obvious you spotted the car we had stolen to-day. I'm very pleased—now we can give the police more information."

I echoed: "Stolen?"

"We reported the loss to the police this afternoon," Kinroy said. "Did you happen to see the man who was driving it?"

It was too slick, much too slick. Something was wrong with this set-up, but it was all much too well fixed for me to make them put a foot wrong. If they had reported the car stolen before I saw it—and my guess was they had—there would be nothing to tie it back to Peaceful Acres. Assuming, of course, that my suspicions were correct and there was something crooked here. It *could* be all my imagination.

I said: "I didn't get a look at the driver, but the passenger is easily described." I added a brief description of the Bowery Boy.

Kinroy let the description slide for a moment. "Mr. Domonici tells me this man robbed you of a considerable sum of money. That's rather a great deal for anyone to have on their person, isn't it?"

"I'd just robbed my kid sister's piggy bank," I said, letting him have it flat-faced.

He took it the way I had guessed. A polite lifting of the eyebrows, a murmured "Oh!" and the return of his right hand to his pocket. Somewhere along the line he'd seen George Sanders at the movies.

Then he asked: "Would you mind describing the man who robbed you again?"

That was an odd one, but I tried it out, giving him the details of the Bowery Boy as I remembered them. Half way through, Kinroy made a small signal with his eyes at Domonici, obviously intended for me to see. As I finished, he said: "I think we should show you something, Mr. Regan." He strolled to the door. "Please follow me."

He passed through the hall, turned right into a short corridor and then opened a door on the left. The room which showed beyond the open doorway was furnished like a boudoir in deep pink, with soft, concealed lighting that made me peer with difficulty as I followed Kinroy inside. Domonici, at my heels, closed the door.

It was a boudoir—of sorts. The lighting came from recesses at ceiling level, and also from behind an imitation stained glass window. In the centre of the room stood a pink satin *chaise-longue*, of the kind that the sirens of the Roaring 'Twenties are supposed to have found so useful.

Only this wasn't being used as any form of casting couch.

Lying flat on his back on the *chaise-longue*, still wearing his blue worsted double-breasted, his arms crossed neatly across his chest, his eyes closed, was the Bowery Boy.

Behind me, Alvar Domonici said: "Yes, he is dead. He was brought here this morning."

I opened my mouth to say something, decided better of it, and turned to face Kinroy. His face had assumed the solemn expression of the professional mortician in the presence of the dead. He said: "This is the man you thought you saw?"

He had me off-balance, there was no doubt about that. For a moment I couldn't say anything. I just stood and gaped at him. Finally I said: "Dammit, I tell you I did see him!"

Kinroy shrugged. "It's quite impossible. You can see for yourself he is dead."

I didn't like doing it, but I stretched out a hand and touched the Bowery Boy's face. It was as cold as a block of ice.

I turned to the door. Domonici was there before me, opening it. At my left ear, Kinroy said: "He was brought here by two friends who found him dead in his apartment. We have complete proof."

In the corridor I lit another cigarette. My hand was shaking. I could still feel the cold touch of the Bowery Boy's cheek on my finger-tips. I said: "What was his name?"

Domonici consulted a small black notebook. "Jed Nerance. He lived at Fifty-four Ocean Park Drive. After the usual formalities of an autopsy, his body is to be cremated, according to his last wish."

I leaned against the wall. Now I knew I needed that double brandy. I said: "All right. You've proved your point. It wasn't this character, it might have been one of your cars, and maybe I was two other people on a Tuesday."

Kinroy breathed out slowly. "I thought," he said quietly, "that you would see it my way, Mr. Regan. No doubt you would like to be getting along?"

No doubt I would. We exchanged polite good-byes and I went out to the car. The tough-looking chauffeur was still leaning against the Hudson as I drove away. He seemed to be part of the coachwork.

I drove back to town in something of a haze. The Bowery Boy, Jed Nerance, was dead. According to Kinroy, witnesses could prove he had been dead since morning. Yet that afternoon he had stuck me up at the point of an unpleasant-looking popgun and removed the sum of one hundred thousand dollars (approx.) from my desk.

I could check, of course. But Kinroy's witnesses would back him up. He wouldn't have mentioned witnesses if he hadn't been sure. I could go to the police. That would involve several statements, all of which might boil down to my word against the word of the Peaceful Acres Company, a highly respectable firm with good standing in the state.

Of course there might be Lynne Ransome's word to back me up. But I had an uncomfortable feeling that I wasn't going to find Lynne Ransome so easily. The first pay 'phone I reached after leaving Peaceful Acres, I had called her. No answer.

There was one other way, and still driving in a somewhat dazed condition, I mused on it. Then I pulled up at an all-night eaterie and found the pay-'phone on the wall. I ordered a cup of black coffee and sipped it while I called the *Herald*.

The girl who ran the library on the overnight trick was a red-head who was engaged to a lad on the sports desk. I told her what I wanted and asked her if she'd check and call me at the apartment. Then I gulped down the coffee and pointed the Plymouth towards home.

My phone was ringing as I opened the apartment door. The time was three-fifteen. I dropped into a chair and picked up the receiver.

It was the *Herald*. The girl in the library—her name was Nancy—had done her checking well. She said: "You're right, Mr. Regan. There was a death at Fifty Four Ocean Park Drive this morning. A man called Jed Nerance. He was a big man, according to our information, but that's all I know."

"That's enough," I told her. "That's more than enough, Nancy."

The front door buzzer woke me around nine. I felt like nothing on earth. My head ached worse than if I had worked out on a couple of pints of whisky the night before. But the buzzer stayed buzzing, just as though some character had jammed it home.

That's more or less the way it was. The character had his thumb jammed hard in the slot, thrusting home the contact as though he intended to push it through the wall.

When I opened the door and glared at him he transferred his attentions. He also moved his fist. It swelled up like a young balloon and smacked me in the centre of the jaw so that I shot back into the lounge and over the nearest chair. I sat down on the floor and made with the rude words. Then I saw the character taking aim again and I rolled over, coming to my feet and skipping behind the divan.

He was a young character, blond and about twenty feet tall. Well, maybe nineteen feet. If he weighed an ounce he weighed all of a ton. He looked like an All-American.

He took another swing at me, missed when I hit the floor behind the divan, and then came jumping across to get a better look. I dived for cover again, skating across the carpet on my belly, with my pyjama pants slipping down. He grabbed at me and only succeeded in ripping the pants right off this time.

But I managed to reach my desk and my fingers connected with the heavy ebony ruler I keep as a showpiece. He jumped again, and this time I let him have it right between the eyes. He went down like a poleaxed steer.

I let him lie there while I closed the front door. Then I went in search of some clothes. In a dressing gown and pyjama top I don't feel entirely decent.

He was still there when I returned with a jug of ice water and a sponge. I doused him with the wet sponge and kept on dousing him until he shook his head and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the ruler, which I waved menacingly under his nose.

He said: "That wasn't fair."

"No one told me the fight was under Queensberry Rules," I said. "Next time you break into my apartment and take a sock at me, let me know in advance how we're supposed to play it."

He shook his head again. Then he sat up straight and barked: "Where is she? Where's Lynne?" His eyes swivelled towards my bedroom.

I asked: "You mean Lynne Ransome? How should I know?"

"Don't give me that," he replied. He looked a pleasant type of college boy, the clean cut type that gives his fraternity pin to his first girl and pines after her the rest of his life. He said: "You've got her somewhere. She's not been home all night."

I said: "Look, son, because a girl hasn't been home all night doesn't mean she's automatically with me. Who the hell are you, anyway, and what's it to you?"

"I'm Dale Waecker," he said, as though that should mean something to me. I shook my head. He went on: "I'm engaged to Lynne."

"Congratulations," I said. "You'd better get up off the floor and have a drink."

"I don't drink. I'm in training." He struggled to his feet and promptly sat down again on the divan. He fingered his head thoughtfully. "That wasn't fair."

"Next time I'll stand still and let you beat me to a pulp," I said. I lit a cigarette. "I suppose Lynne told you she was coming to see me yesterday?" He nodded, groaning with the movement. "Well, I saw her, but she went off on her own while we were having a coffee and that's the last I know. I'm just as anxious to find her as you are."

His frank blue eyes narrowed. "That the truth?"

I held up my right hand. "So help me."

"She said she would meet me last night. Then she didn't turn up, and I called her apartment and there wasn't any answer, and I've been calling every hour since then." He began to struggle to his feet. "I'm going to the police."

I stood aside. "She's your girl. But I ought to tell you, before you go, that yesterday she came to see me with about a hundred thousand dollars in her purse which she'd got from her sister's safe-deposit box. It's a fair guess that whatever she's doing or wherever she is, it's got something to do with that money."

"A hundred thousand dollars?" It was like hitting him again. "You mean she's been kidnapped for the money?"

"Not quite." I explained, as simply as I could, how Lynne had come to my office and how the Bowery Boy had stuck us up for

the bank roll. I didn't tell him anything about Peaceful Acres or the Bowery Boy sleeping his last sleep there. I said: "Kay Ransome didn't come by that money entirely honestly. She was Hal Greevey's girl at some time—Greevey, the San Francisco racketeer who died about a year ago. I think Greevey gave her that money to stash away because the tax boys were on to him, only he died before he could claim it."

"But that doesn't make Lynne a criminal." Waecker was thinking about as fast as he knew how. "Why shouldn't we tell the police?"

I threw up my hands in despair. "Can you see the explaining we'd have to do to a bunch of dumb flatfeet about the hundred thousand and why Lynne Ransome came to see me in the first place and everything? No, give it another few hours. If she doesn't show by then, we'll work something out." I looked at the bruise beginning to show on his forehead. "In about another half hour you'll have a swell pair of black eyes. You'd best stay here and nurse them—you can wait by the phone, too, in case Lynne calls." A thought struck me. "What d'you do for a living?"

"Physical training instructor at Public School 27," he said proudly. "But I have a day off to-day."

He looked the type. "All right," I said. "I'm going down to my office for a while. You watch out for things, eh?"

I finished dressing, had some breakfast and went out. Young Atlas was practising leg exercises on the rug as I left. I felt very glad I had found that ruler.

It was after lunch when I returned, following a morning at the studios. Waecker had found some food in the ice-box and was also pitching into my stock of orange juice.

He greeted me with a happy, happy smile. "She called!" I tried not to look too surprised, and he went on: "Rang through from San Francisco. Appears she remembered there were some of her sister's things at their old lodgings, so she went to get them. She'll be home on the five o'clock plane."

He had a lovely pair of black eyes by now. I said: "She could have said where she was going."

"Oh, she said she was sorry about that. It just struck her while you were phoning, and she found she had five minutes to get to the airport, so she dashed off." He took another swig of orange juice. "This is good stuff. I thought you press agents drank nothing but whisky."

"We also chew nails and spit rust," I growled. "Women!"

I left him to it after making arrangements for him to go to the

airport and meet her. The rest of the afternoon I spent in the office, sorting out correspondence and writing a couple of press releases for a commercial account I was handling. At ten minutes past five the phone rang out and Lynne Ransome's voice came on the line.

"Oh, Mr. Regan, I'm so glad you're both all right! Dale's a light-heavyweight champion and you might have killed one another."

"I breathed garlic on him and he fell down and hit his head," I said. "What did you find in San Francisco?"

"Just a few photographs. Everything else had been destroyed I'll bring them to you right away," she replied. Then her voice changed. "But Mr. Regan—you know that man who—came to the office yesterday?"

"His name's Jed Nerance," I told her. "What about him?"

She sounded puzzled. "Not according to the photographs. Kay took a picture of him and he's called Lannie Trask. She wrote it on the back. He used to work with Greevey because there's another picture of him taken with Greevey."

"So he's changed his name," I said. "Your sister seems to have been an enthusiastic camera artist."

"That's how she started at the Red Domino," the girl replied. "Taking pictures of the customers. But that wasn't what I wanted to tell you. I saw Trask again to-day, just after I left the airport. He was walking down Vine Street."

The phone went cold as ice in my hand. She had seen the Bowery Boy this afternoon. I had seen him yesterday and he was dead.

I said: "You're sure it was the same man?"

She laughed. "Mr. Regan, you couldn't mistake that one. He came out of a bank and got into a cab. I saw him plainly."

"Honey," I said, "I love you. Just come round to the apartment right away and bring your boy friend. I love you both."

She said: "Why, Mr. Regan . . . !" I reached for my hat, locked up the office and sped downstairs to the car. Inside seven minutes flat I was back in the apartment, and three minutes later Lynne Ransome and Dale Waecker were at the door.

I almost grabbed the photographs from her. I said to Waecker: "Fix yourselves some drinks," and heard his reproachful, "I'm in training."

The girl said: "I'd love a gin fizz." I was thumbing through the pictures. Most of them were photographs of either Lynne or Kay, but about half a dozen were of Hal Greevey. There were some of the Bowery Boy and Greevey together, looking very matey. There

was also a picture of Greevey with a thin, dark man whom I didn't recognise. He had long, fine hands that he held loosely at his sides. His eyes were deep and black, sunken in his head like the sockets in a skull.

And there was also a picture of Laurence Kinroy.

He looked exactly as he did now—tall, handsome, distinguished. I turned the picture over. There was no name to identify it.

Lynne Ransome asked: "Mr. Regan, do any of these pictures mean anything?"

I looked at the picture of Kinroy again. There was something here, but I wasn't bright enough to see it. I said: "I don't know. I wish I did."

"Perhaps we should go to the police now?" she asked again.

I nodded. "Perhaps we should. Leave it with me. I'll talk to a friend of mine in Homicide." I pocketed the photographs. "You two probably want to be alone. I'm going out to eat. The apartment's yours."

Waecker had the grace to blush. I think he would have preferred a chaperone. I went downstairs and out to the car.

As I opened the door to climb behind the wheel I found I had a passenger. Alvar Domonici grabbed my arm and said: "Please, Mr. Regan—I must talk with you!"

I stuck the ignition key in the lock and slid behind the wheel. Domonici hung on to my arm. His eyes looked wild. It was the first time I had seen his composure really shaken.

He repeated: "Please—I must talk with you!"

"I'm not stopping you," I told him. "Go ahead."

"No—not here. Let's drive somewhere. I want to talk with you quietly." His fingers were digging into my arm.

I started the motor, put the car into gear and moved out of the drive. "All right. I'll drive and you talk. Don't think I'm going anywhere too quiet—I trust you about as far as I could throw this car."

We turned into Hollywood Boulevard and I began driving slowly out of town. Domonici sat without speaking by my side. I found my cigarettes and offered him one. He took a cigarette without saying anything.

This went on for about ten minutes. I let him simmer, wondering whether he intended to talk or whether this was just another ruse. Finally I got tired of waiting and said: "You were going to talk—remember?"

He drew in a mouthful of smoke. His hand reached for the cigarette. It was shaking like one of the silver birches at Peaceful Acres. He said: "You've got to hide me. I've run away."



"Huh?" I shot a look at him.

"I mean it, Mr. Regan. I could not stand their methods any longer. You understand—I did not mean to become involved in what they were doing, but it went beyond me." He looked down at his feet. "Besides, I needed their money."

"You're talking in riddles," I said impatiently. "Start at the beginning. Who are 'they'? And what do you mean—you've run away?"

He said: "Kinroy and the rest. Greevey—you've heard of Hal Greevey, the racketeer? He is interred at Peaceful Acres."

"Oh brother!" I struck my forehead with the flat of my hand. "So you've run away from a corpse? You sure you feel well?"

He ran his fingers nervously across his lower jaw. "No, not quite like that, Mr. Regan. It is not like that at all. I should start at the beginning."

I said: "It might help." I turned left, thinking I would run three sides of a square and finish roughly where we had started. Behind the Plymouth another car turned left with me. Its headlights flicked on to my driving mirror. As we passed under a street light I noticed it was a very old Ford V-8 coupe. It looked rather like a teen-agers' hot rod.

"Wait a minute," I said. The traffic was light. I made a sharp U-turn and gave the Plymouth its head. The Ford made a similar U-turn and also speeded up.

Domonici sensed my worry. He looked over his shoulder. He had started to shake again.

"I think we'll go downtown to Police Headquarters," I said, and he nearly left the seat in his agitation.

"No—not there. I could not go there." He made another grab at my arm. "Please, Mr. Regan—we are being followed."

"You catch on quick," I murmured, and let the car have a little more gas. The needle shifted to forty, then on to fifty. Behind us the Ford hung on grimly. I said: "Go on talking."

"There is not time. You must stop and let me out. I feared something like this. They will kill us."

I gave the Plymouth another touch of throttle. "Not to-night, Alvar." We careered down the street like a brace of hopped-up reefer boys on a midnight jag. I didn't like it at all. The traffic was much too thin for safety. I said: "Talk, you mutt. Tell me the whole caboodle."

"This is terrible," Domonici muttered. He looked as if he might make a dive for the door any minute. I wondered whether I could

shake off the Ford if I did some quick doubling. It seemed unlikely.

We crossed Hollywood Boulevard and went on through the green lights. Before long the motor-cycle police would be jumping us, which was just what I wanted. It couldn't happen too soon for Mrs. Regan's little boy.

I practically snarled at Domonici. "For pete's sake—tell me what this is all about? What are you frightened of?"

He took his eyes off the car following. He said: "Greevey. Hal Greevey."

"Greevey's dead. You said yourself he's buried at Peaceful Acres. Talk sense."

"Greevey—it's Greevey I'm afraid of." He suddenly let out a yell. "They're coming!"

The driving mirror showed it. That Ford must have been a souped-up job after all because it practically leapt across the fifty yards separating us. The Plymouth seemed to be standing still. One moment the Ford was behind, the next it was alongside and starting to crowd. I didn't have time to see who was driving. Domonici made a grab at the door. Then the Ford swung viciously inboard, and there was the tremendous, heart-cracking noise of tearing steel as the two cars grazed. I lost the wheel and the Plymouth swerved left, mounting the kerb. Then we hit the shop window and after that everything was red and roaring and very unpleasant.

The sidewalk was hard. I knew it was the sidewalk because it had the smell of concrete and shoe leather and gasoline fumes that sidewalks always carry. I opened my eyes and looked straight into the face of a very young man whom I confused for a moment with Dale Waecker. Then I saw he was wearing a white coat and realised he must be a hospital interne. There was a good deal of chatter around me. Somewhere slightly out of focus swung the heads of a number of people.

The young man said: "You're a lucky fellow. You could be dead."

I answered: "And at Peaceful Acres." It sounded very funny. I laughed a little and started to sit up. The interne's arm held me back.

"We'll have you in hospital in no time."

"What's wrong with me?" I asked. I felt muzzy, but otherwise I seemed all right.

"Not a thing," the interne said heartily. "But a night's rest will do you good. All the good in the world."

"I don't want to be done all the good in the world," I told him irritably. "What about my passenger?" I managed to get his arm away and to sit up. The crowd moved back a trifle. Through their feet I could see a still form under the glare of a street lamp. I pointed towards it. "That him?"

The interne nodded. He didn't say anything. I knew Domonici was dead. "And the other car—what happened to the driver?"

"We think it was stolen. The driver ran off."

I managed to get his restraining arms away long enough to stand up. My head was spinning, but that would be all right soon. A uniformed patrolman appeared from nowhere.

He said: "Helluva smash. Lucky you weren't all killed."

I was about to say, "That was the idea," when I thought better of it. So I told the patrolman all about it and explained that Domonici was a client of mine and gave him all the details I could. When it was over I brushed aside the interne's good intentions—he wanted a hospital case to practice on, I think—and persuaded them to find me a cab.

At the apartment Lynne Ransome and Waecker had gone home, leaving a note to thank me for the hospitality. There was also a note from the night porter to say that Susan had telephoned from Middleburg, but there was no message. I stuck a chair under the jamb of the door and balanced a bucket in front of the window and went to bed. About three in the morning I awoke yelling my head off and covered in sweat. I took a couple of sleeping pills and counted starlets queueing up for movie tests.

Next thing I knew it was daylight and I was as stiff and sore as if I'd played in the Harvard-Yale game and the front door buzzer was blatting its heart out. I rolled out of bed, walking gingerly to the door (there wasn't any other way to walk, because every movement was like hot irons) and picked up the ebony ruler on the way.

Lieutenant Grimsdyke said: "You can put down the blunt instrument. I'm friendly." He smiled his pepsodent smile as I waved him in. "You had some trouble last night, I gather. What were you doing with Domonici?"

"He was an about-to-be client," I lied. He followed me into the bathroom. The shower was good and hot, and it eased my aching bones considerably.

Grimsdyke said: "There seems to be a heavy mortality rate among your about-to-be clients. First Kay Ransome, now Alvar Domonici." He sighed. "At least he's well fixed for a funeral."

I wondered whether to tell him more. I thought it might be

wise to tell him just a little and nothing beyond that. There were too many loose ends waiting to be tied up. I said: "Did you know that Kay Ransome was once Hal Greevey's girl?"

He leaned against the wall, letting his hands run under the shower. "She was? That's interesting. How did you find out?"

"Lynne Ransome," I told him. "Remember she came to see me? She found some pictures of Kay and Greevey together." I turned off the shower and groped for a towel.

Grimsdyke put it into my hands. "And Greevey is buried at Peaceful Acres. Y'know, Mack, I feel there's a connection here and you know what it is. Not that I'd want to hurry you, of course, but. . . ."

I said: "You couldn't. I don't know more than that."

He lit a cigarette, passed one to me. "Remember me, Mack? I'm the friendly policeman."

"And I'm the press agent who wants to stay alive. No, Grimmie, there's nothing in this beyond what I've told you. If and when there is, you'll be the first to know."

"I hope you're alive to tell me." He left it at that. We ate breakfast together, and then I went downtown with him to see the traffic boys about the car. Knowing Grimsdyke made it much smoother. As the interne had suspected, the Ford was a stolen hot rod. Some teen-ager was raising all hell about it over on Lonsdale Drive. Remembering how that car had moved, I felt it was safer for the city that it was now a wreck. The Plymouth was also a complete write-off.

There was a vague description of the man who had driven the Ford. He had been seen running down the street after the accident. He was tall and thin, someone said. That was all.

After I left the station house I walked round the block in the thin December sunlight, thinking about this and that. There was a drive-yourself car lot on the next corner. I chose a one-year-old Chevrolet, paid the deposit, gave the necessary references and drove out. This was the kind of day on which to take it easy, I thought. I idled back to the apartment, wondering whether I should make a move or let the whole damn' thing slide. I couldn't make up my mind.

It was made up for me as I pushed open the door of the apartment. A gun jammed hard into my ribs and a voice said: "Softly, brother. Just take it softly."

It wasn't the Bowery Boy's voice. This was a hissing, sliding sort of voice. It sounded like superheated steam escaping from a pipe. I couldn't see the owner. He stayed behind me.

I took it softly. The gun pushed, and I moved forward with it. The steamy voice said: "Now just stand still. And don't try anything."

The gun moved away from my back. Then a scarf whipped across the front of my face and over my eyes. I jumped, and the gun dug into me again. "Softly, brother."

Another voice came into the picture. This was a harder sound, the voice of a man used to getting his own way. This one said: "Regan! You're sticking your neck out. It's going to be chopped off."

I said: "You make me sound like a Thanksgiving turkey. What goes on?"

The hard voice said: "I think you've learned too much. It's time you forgot it. We're going to see you forget."

"I don't get any of this," I replied, knowing full well I was talking through the back of my skull. "What exactly do you want?"

"Just you, brother," said the hiss of escaping steam. It didn't sound at all pleasant to me. Those three words held the most sinister message I'd heard to date.

"I don't see why," I remonstrated, making a somewhat obviously desperate play for time. "I haven't any money. It's no use snatching me."

The other man laughed. "I told you. You know too much."

"About what?"

The steam said: "About death." He made me feel like shivering. He laughed a hissing little laugh, echoing the hard man. There was the sound of someone walking towards me. It was the hard man, I guessed, since the gun stayed firmly in my back. The scarf fell away from my eyes again. Both characters were now behind me. The steamy voice said: "Just don't turn around, brother. Walk ahead of me into the bedroom."

When the gun dug at me I obeyed. The window was open, with the fire escape beyond. Steamy said: "Get out on the ladder." I did as I was told, with the gun still bruising my ribs. The winter wind tore gustily at me.

"Now start walking down, and don't look around." I hesitated, and he added: "I'm right behind you with the gun."

It was neat, very neat. I hadn't the slightest idea of the identity of the two characters, but I could hear them clattering down the iron steps behind me. The escape led to the alley back of the apartment block. I wished wildly for a garbage man or a window cleaner to come along and knew I'd be disappointed. They would

not be taking such a chance if they had thought it might happen.

At the foot of the escape stood a black station wagon, its rear doors open. "Get aboard." Steamy Voice issued the command as softly as ever. He might almost have been asking me to have a cigarette. I started to climb into the back of the station wagon.

Then something hard struck savagely at the back of my neck, and the floor of the truck came up and hit me. Darkness came early for me that morning.

It was still dark when I opened my eyes again. Dark and rather cold. I shivered, and the movement caused me to move my head, and at once I had good reason to remember that I had been well and truly sapped. The back of my head felt twice its normal size, and it ached as though a thousand demons were treading over it with hobnailed boots.

I found I was lying on a stone floor. Sitting up cautiously, I felt around me, and on either side my hands came in contact with cold, rather damp stone walls. Wherever I was, my prison was very small. It was dark for the simple reason that there was no entry for light. I reached upwards, and immediately thanked my lucky stars I had not tried to stand up. The stone ceiling was a bare six inches above my head when I was sitting bolt upright. In fact I barked my knuckles on it.

Next I tried the length of the cell. It appeared to be just long enough for me to lie down at full length.

I lay there on the stone, wondering about this. The place seemed like one of those mediaeval prison dungeons that the hero gets thrown into . . . and, of course, out of which he manages to scratch his way with the fourteenth century equivalent of a nail-file. Right then my admiration for the Count of Monte Cristo increased considerably.

I tried to puzzle out where I might be. My head still ached and my brain didn't seem to be working on all six, so perhaps I wasn't as stupid as I decided I must be, immediately the answer struck me.

When it did, I felt even colder.

I was in one of the tombs in Peaceful Acres.

That could be the only answer. Alvar Domonici had decided to talk to me, so he had been killed. He had wanted to talk because he was frightened of someone or something at Peaceful Acres. When that someone—I discounted the word *something* because it gave me the shivers—knew I was not killed in the crash, he had sent his muscle boys to eliminate me.

And what better way than to entomb me?

It would be Kinroy, of course. The slick, smooth company

secretary. He had probably been the accounting brain behind Greevey, too. I wondered about that, and felt a little sick at the thought that now I should probably never know for certain. There was something crooked about Peaceful Acres . . . but what? That one had me puzzled.

I felt more than a little scared. Then I did some more thinking. If the muscle boys intended to eliminate me, they could just as well have shot me before tossing me into the tomb.

*That thought cheered me . . . but not much.*

I got back against the wall and squinted at the luminous dial of my wristwatch. It was still going, and the hands pointed to three o'clock.

That was how my thoughts were going. There wasn't much else to think about. The time crawled slowly by. I decided to keep my mind off the more gruesome problems of what could happen. Instead I concentrated on other matters, like planning some new ideas for clients and potential clients. I had just worked out a magnificent publicity scheme for De Mille when I heard something move beyond the walls. My watch indicated six-thirty.

There was a scraping, grating noise. Then part of the wall on my right moved outwards with a creak, and light flooded the tiny chamber. I moved forward, and instantly more light beamed straight into my eyes.

Steamy Voice was behind the flashlight, though I could not see him. He said: "Come on out, brother. Just take it softly."

The opening was only large enough for me to crawl through on hands and knees. I scraped through, rubbing my head against the stone. The light hurt my eyes. I could not see beyond it.

"Stand up and turn around."

I did as I was told, blinking to try to accustom my sight to the new surroundings. But immediately the scarf went round my eyes again. I said: "You don't mean me to wear out my eyes."

"You're safer this way, brother," was the only answer I got. A hand gripped my arm. "Now walk."

We went up some stone steps, then along a corridor, turned left, then right, then down a flight of stairs, and after that I forgot exactly where we were going. Finally Steamy Voice said: "Stop here." I stopped.

There were other people near me. I could sense their presence.

Then the voice of the hard man broke into the silence. He said: "You realise I could have you killed, Regan?"

"That's fairly obvious," I answered. It was. I had no illusions about the kind of spot I was in.

"You know where you are?"

"Not the faintest idea," I lied.

I heard his quick suck-in of breath. "Don't lie to me. Do you know where you are?"

I said: "At a guess, somewhere in Peaceful Acres."

He chuckled. "I thought you knew." Then his tone changed. "I'm letting you in on that because I want to impress something on your dumb brain. *You* know you're in Peaceful Acres, but you'll never be able to prove it. You don't know who I am and you'll never know. But you're going to do something for me."

"I am?"

"Most certainly you are. You see, I need a stooge."

I said: "What for, a cross-talk act?"

Something hard and supple slashed at the back of my knees. I went down on the carpet, cursing. Instantly hands gripped me and hauled me to my feet again, holding the scarf firmly about my eyes. The back of my legs felt red raw.

The hard man said: "Don't play it funny, Regan. You're going to be my stooge. If you don't . . . well, let me explain. Susan Loxley is in Middleburg, isn't she? Visiting her aunt at 4214 Reynold Drive, I believe? Now, do you remember what happened to Kay Ransome?"

I took a deep breath. "You take the trick," I said.

"I take all the tricks," said the hard man. "It would be very easy for me to send a man to Middleburg, and Susan Loxley would be no more."

"In that case," I said, "let's have the story and we'll forget the threats. Just pretend I'm your boy."

There was a shuffling of feet on the carpet. "Now listen carefully, Regan. There was over a hundred thousand dollars in Kay Ransome's safe-deposit box. In another safe-deposit box in San Francisco there is more than a quarter of a million. It all belonged to Hal Greevey—you've heard of him, I believe? I want that quarter of a million and you're going to get it for me."

I said: "It'll be the first time I've robbed a safe-deposit company. I hear it's not so easy."

"It's the easiest thing in the world, provided you're the person to whom the safe-deposit box belongs, provided you have the pass-word, and provided you have the key." He paused. Someone laughed softly. "I have the pass-word and the key, but I cannot go. You are going to become me."

I asked the obvious question. "Who are you?"

The hard man said: "The name's Crossen. Robert Crossen. Spelt C-r-o-s-s-e-n. Got it?"



I nodded. "You're taking a long chance, aren't you? What's to prevent me from turning you in after all this is over?"

"Let's be sensible, Regan. All you have are a voice and a name. You can't connect the two. The name will end when this job is finished."

"And you'll be on your way from Peaceful Acres, leaving Greevey's bones to rot, I suppose." I sighed. "Ah me, it's a tough life for honest racketeers."

Crossen chuckled. "The race is to the swift. Greevey"—he paused for a fraction of a second—"didn't live to enjoy the fruits of his labours." His voice became brisk again. "You'll leave for San Francisco immediately. One of our cars will take you to the airport. Talk to no one. You'll be watched every moment of the way. All the instructions you need are in an envelope in the car."

I said: "Wait a minute. What happens afterwards?"

"That's up to you. You don't know me . . . but I know you. If ever I suspect you've sicked the cops on to me, you know what will happen."

I thought: *brother, if I believe that I believe in the stork. You'll let me do the job and then I'll be for the high jump.*

"All right," I told him. "It's a bargain."

"Then you can get going right away," replied Crossen. "I hope your luck holds."

A big hand gripped my arm. A rasping, heavy voice growled: "C'mon. This way."

I said: "Lannie Trask! But you're dead!"

The Bowery Boy said: "I sure am. Best example of a Zombie you ever did see. Let's go."

The car—one of Peaceful Acres' black Hudsons—was smooth and easy. I lounged on the cushions, feeling it swish down the drive towards the main road.

The driver said: "You can take the bandage off now, Mr. Regan."

I pulled the scarf from my eyes. Through the driving mirror I caught a glimpse of the chauffeur's face: it was the same tough character who had ridden with Domonici two nights ago. Before I could say anything he added: "Don't bother asking questions. I ain't talking."

I subsided. Whichever way I looked at it, I was in a spot. I could get to the airport and call Grimsdyke. Maybe I was being watched. Then again, maybe I wasn't. I had no way of telling what Crossen looked like, what Steamy Voice looked like, how

many others were involved, where I was being checked, or anything. One wrong move and a torpedo could be on his way to Middleburg to kill Susan. It was a chance I wasn't prepared to take.

The big puzzle was the fact that Lannie Trask was still alive. Lynne Ransome had already told me she had seen him, after I knew—or thought I knew—he was dead. But though I had believed the evidence of her eyes, what I had doubted was the truth of that evidence. People make mistakes; they see things that aren't there. She could have been mistaken without knowing it. Or Lannie could have had a double. It does happen.

Yet barely five minutes ago the voice of Lannie Trask had spoken to me. He had handed me into the car, still blindfolded, and told the driver to take off.

So he was dead. So I'd just talked with a walking corpse. So I was nuts.

I lit a cigarette. I felt rather sick inside.

Beside me, on the cushions, lay a long white envelope, addressed: Mackenzie Regan. I slit it open. Two keys and a folded sheet of white paper fell out. There was some typewriting on the paper. I read it.

"Your name is Robert Crossen. The name of the safe-deposit company is the Hayward Guaranty Corporation, Childers Building, West 54th Street. No one there has ever seen Robert Crossen. The password is 'Chosen'. Two keys are necessary—the larger to open the door of the safe, the smaller to open the box inside the safe. Both keys are enclosed. The driver will give you your airline tickets. A room has been booked for you and paid for, at the Vale-Plaza Hotel on Central Street. It is in the name of Robert Crossen. Take the airport bus to the city centre and then walk to the hotel. Stay in your room until nine-thirty to-morrow morning, then walk to the Childers Building. When you have the contents of the box, go immediately to the airport and take the 10.55 plane to Los Angeles. You will be met."

They had it all worked out. I was a sitting duck.

Neither the chauffeur nor I spoke until the car swung into the airport. Then he leaned over and tossed me a leather overnight bag. "Cigarettes, toothpaste, shaving kit—everything you need in there. Here's your tickets." He passed me the buff envelope containing the airline reservations. The car stopped and he got out, opening the door for me.

"Guess I'll wait for the plane with you, Mr. Regan. If you don't mind?"

I said: "You don't have to you know."

He grinned. "Just part of my job." I took the hint.

There were five minutes to kill. I checked my tickets, bought an evening paper—and one for the chauffeur—smoked a cigarette, and then the loudspeaker was announcing that passengers were to board the plane.

From now on I was free for a couple of hours. Or was I? Maybe Crossen himself was aboard the plane. I had no way of telling.

The passengers looked innocent enough. It was a thin flight—six people, including myself. Two of the six were women, one young and blonde, the other middle-aged, plump, looking like a suburban housewife on her way to visit relatives. That left three men.

One of the three was buried behind a newspaper. I caught a glimpse of him—balding, with a placid, executive-type of face. The other two were in their early thirties. Not one of them would have been noticed in a crowd.

Then, as the stewardess prepared to wave away the gangway, another passenger raced across the tarmac, taking the steps two at a time and sliding into a rear seat without pausing. He was tall and thin and dark and his eyes seemed sunk deep into his head. He brought out a handkerchief to wipe his face and I noticed his long, thin hands.

It was the man whom Kay Ransome had once snapped with Hal Greevey.

I leaned back, deciding to save my energy. This proved that Crossen's words were no idle boast. Perhaps this was Crossen himself? In saying I couldn't tell what he looked like, Crossen did not know I had seen those photographs. Because if this weren't Crossen, it must be someone connected with him. So far the top brass of the Greevey gang were in on this sweet set-up.

The plane took off while I was thinking about this. I unfolded my newspaper and settled down to pass the time comfortably. The thin man leaned back, his eyes half closed. I knew he was watching every move I made. After a little while I went to sleep.

At San Francisco he followed me towards the airport building, keeping about two passengers behind in the crocodile file. He did not stare at me, but merely kept an odd glance or two at me as we checked through to the airport bus. But he was on it—as, indeed, were four of the other passengers—as it pulled out of the airport.

Anyway, there was one less worry. I had spotted the tail, and he had no way of knowing I had done so.

I was first off the bus at the city centre, and I set off for the Vale-Plaza at a fast walk. There was no point in looking round. Either he was following me or he was not. If he were I should soon know.

The desk-clerk in the Vale-Plaza recognised me as soon as I gave my name. "Ah, yes, Mr. Crossen—I have your reservation. Everything has been arranged as you wished."

I tried not to look surprised. "Everything?"

"Why yes, sir. Your room is reserved. The telephone has been disconnected as you instructed. Cold supper is ready in the room and you will not be disturbed until the morning. That is what you ordered, sir, I believe?"

I said: "Yes—of course." Inwardly I chalked one up for Mr. Crossen. He was thorough. The desk-clerk seemed to consider that, however eccentric the wishes of the customer, they should be accepted without the slightest degree of astonishment. He wished me good-night and I followed the bell-hop into the elevator.

For exactly thirty seconds we were alone. I thought about scribbling a note and giving it to the bell-hop. It could be done. The police would be on the job quickly enough.

Then I thought: And maybe the bell-hop's fixed, too. Even if he isn't, the police will check with me first. They wouldn't act merely on the receipt of a strange note. And, if they checked, the tail would see it.

I discarded the idea.

My room was Six-seventeen. I gave the bell-hop a dollar to make sure he remembered me and practically groaned when he took it merely as a hint to arrange the "Do Not Disturb" card more prominently on the outside of the door.

A trolley was set in the centre of the room. On it, under covers, was the cold supper I was supposed to have ordered. I sat down on the bed, opening the overnight bag. Again, Crossen showed his thoroughness. Toothpaste, toothbrush, an electric razor, a clean shirt in my size, a pair of pyjamas. He had it all tied up.

Footsteps sounded along the corridor. Then the door of the room next to mine—Six-eighteen—opened and a bell-hop's voice announced: "This way, sir."

The room was directly next to mine, with my bathroom on the other side, between my room and Six-sixteen. I went to the window and looked out. The sill was broad enough to take a full-grown man, and it stretched the length of the building, towards Six-eighteen. In the other direction, towards Six-sixteen, the sill

stopped for the width of the two adjoining bathrooms. There was no way into Six-sixteen, but a determined climber could get into Six-eighteen.

Six floors below was the street.

I walked over to the door. What was there to prevent me from leaving by that route and going out through the back entrance of the hotel? As far as I could see, nothing.

I turned the door handle gently. It moved without noise. And the door stayed shut. Someone had locked it on the outside.

Someone? Could it have been the bell-hop? Unless he were in the plot, that wouldn't be likely. Then the locked door presupposed that Crossen's tail had obtained a duplicate key to my room. Given enough money, such a thing was possible. I went to the phone, picked it up. As I had expected, it was completely dead.

That left the sill route to Six-eighteen. I stuck my head out of the window again and examined the sill with care. It could be done. I didn't want to do it, but it could be done.

But if the tail were in Six-eighteen? The only thing would be to take him by surprise. I thought: *Take him by surprise. Move over, Superman.*

I kicked off my shoes and slid my legs over the sill. In stockinged feet I got a reasonable purchase on the concrete. It struck cold at me, and the wind tore at my clothes as I squeezed out of the window and turned around, my face to the wall. So long as I kept my nerve, I was all right.

So long as I kept my nerve.

There were plenty of projections along the wall. A stackpipe here, a knobby piece of concrete there. That part wasn't difficult. The tough part was trying to forget the street was six floors below and I had only to make one false move and I should be a heap of smashed flesh and bones on the sidewalk. The hum of San Francisco's night traffic drifted up to me tauntingly.

Inch by tortured inch, I edged along. The wind whipped at me. My hands caught on the projections and tore. The cold concrete numbed my toes. But, slowly, painfully, desperately, I made my way along that sill towards the window of Six-eighteen.

Then at last I was there and clinging with relief to the edge of the window frame.

The window was partly open at the top and the occupant of Six-eighteen was talking. I could hear him faintly through the curtains.

"Regan's safe as if he were in Fort Knox," he was saying. "Sure I'll call you every hour, on the hour. If you don't hear from me,

you'll know something has gone wrong. Everything's okay for Middleburg, by the way."

The voice was soft and hissing, like hot steam escaping from a pipe.

I clung there, immovable. I could have cried. The one thing I hadn't thought about had been planned. If Steamy Voice didn't call back every hour, the gang at Peaceful Acres would know their scheme had misfired. Therefore if I jumped Steamy Voice and handed him over to the police, Crossen and Kinroy and Trask would make the arrangements for Middleburg.

I peered around the window. The curtains were drawn, but there was a gap large enough for me to squint into the room. The thin dark man was sprawled on the bed in his shirtsleeves, cradling the phone by his shoulder. As I watched, he hung up and stretched out, yawning.

I thought: *Well, Regan, at least you've proved one thing. The dark man isn't Crossen—he's Steamy Voice.*

There was nothing for it but to make the agonising crawl back to my room. The sill looked about half the width and my hands were twice as numb. But I started on it, taking my time and working along while I tried to pretend the drop to solid earth wasn't more than a couple of feet.

About two years later I was again outside the open window of Six-seventeen. I practically fell inside, and on to the bed. Groping for my cigarettes, I lit one and lay back, exhausted. The boys had me fixed. I could do nothing more to-night. I might just as well go on saving energy. The rate at which I was doing this, I reckoned, I should soon be useful as a source of radio-active power.

I had a bath and went to bed. There was one thing sure: I could sleep to-night, but Steamy Voice couldn't. He had to phone Peaceful Acres every hour, on the hour. I slept.

The Vale-Plaza staff were efficient—I'll say that for them. Promptly at eight-thirty the telephone rang, proving they had re-connected it that morning. I rolled over in bed, catching sight of my watch in the same movement, picked up the handset and listened to the voice of Room Service bidding me good-morning.

I didn't agree with them, but arguing would do no good. Room Service added, with the impersonal cheerfulness of someone who has been awake for several hours, "Your breakfast tray is outside your door as you requested, sir."

I said: "Oh, sure." The chief thing that angered me about this whole deal was the cool, ruthless efficiency of Crossen and his associates, who had me held prisoner in a modern hotel without

the slightest notion of who they were. No force, no rough stuff—just subtle, gentle persuasion coupled with threats I dare not ignore.

I got out of bed and went to the door. It opened. That meant Steamy Voice was up earlier than I. The breakfast tray stood on an occasional table outside the door. They had given me coffee and forgotten the orange juice, but you can't have everything. I picked up the tray and carried it into the room.

Later, when I had washed, shaved and breakfasted, I looked on the world with a less jaundiced eye. I might not be making much headway against Crossen, but I had identified Steamy Voice with the dark man who once knew Hal Greevey and I knew exactly what Crossen was after. The only trick, I thought with a touch of the old sourness, was to stay alive long enough to make use of that knowledge.

Precisely at nine-thirty, I left the room and took the elevator down. I left the overnight bag in the room as I had been told, and checked my key with the desk. Then I set off for the Childers Building.

There was no sign of Steamy Voice, but I guessed he was either following me unobtrusively, or else had handed over the job of tail to someone else. In any case, I had made up my mind now to see the entire thing through, collect the money, return to Peaceful Acres, and then try to start something.

It wasn't difficult to reach the Childers Building—about ten minutes steady walking brought me to its glass and concrete frontage. The Hayward Guaranty Corporation had the ground floor and basement parts of the building. As I walked inside the hands of the big electric clock in the entrance hall pointed to ten minutes to ten.

I spotted a grille marked "Safe Deposits" and marched up to it. The clerk behind the steel bars rewarded me with his best ten-to-ten smile.

I said: "My name is Robert Crossen. I have a safe-deposit box here and I should like to open it." I held up the two keys.

You'd have thought I was Rita Hayworth. He turned on the smile even wider as he pushed a slip of paper through the grille. "Certainly, sir. If you will just fill up this form?"

I looked at it. The form asked for my name, my address, and my codeword. All very simple. I filled it up and passed it back to him. He said: "If you don't mind waiting a moment, sir, we'll just check the particulars and then you can go down to the vaults."

I nodded. My chief hope was that I wasn't showing the fears I felt. A strange city, a false identity, an application to open a safe deposit box that wasn't mine . . . I could just see the faces of the local police when they pounced on this one. Especially when I tried to tell them I was acting under duress for a bunch of crooks.

It was the longest five minutes I have ever spent, even longer than any of the five minutes on that sill the previous night. Then, at least, I was doing something. But now . . . I waited.

Presently another clerk approached the man behind the grille, handed him a piece of paper and went away again. The paper was studied carefully. There was a long pause—that is to say, it seemed a long pause to me. Then the smile was turned on again.

"Right, Mr. Crossen. Everything is in order. I'll have a messenger take you below."

He pressed a button. A dignified, middle-aged man in uniform appeared from round the counter. "This way, sir."

We took the elevator down. It seemed to descend a long, long way into the depths of San Francisco. When we stepped out we were in a long, steel-walled room from which more than a dozen corridors led off in different directions. At the far end of the room was an enormous safe door, the kind of thing that would have sent Jimmy Valentine chasing off to see a psychiatrist had it been shut. But now it stood wide open, with an armed guard stolidly pacing back and forth before it. People were coming and going in all directions.

The messenger led me towards the door, nodding to the guard. "Sixty years these vaults have been established, sir," he remarked proudly. "And not a single customer has ever lost a thing."

I thought: *Brother, until now!*

Once through the door the messenger handed me over to another uniformed attendant, passing him the card which gave details of the Crossen safe. We walked through a room, the walls of which were lined with individual safes, then on to another room, and finally into a third, where this man indicated a safe set at shoulder height into the wall.

I put the larger of the two keys into the lock. Instantly the messenger produced another key and inserted it into a second lock just below it. He turned, and my key was free to move. The safe door swung open gently.

Without a word, the messenger moved away, leaving me to examine the contents of the safe without interference. Inside was a green deed box. I brought it out, opening it with the other key. It contained nothing but a bulky envelope.



I slit the envelope with my finger nail.

Crossen had been right. There were more dollar bills in that envelope than I had ever seen at one time in all my life. Most of them were for five hundred dollars or even a thousand, but here and there a hundred dollar bill nestled uncomfortably, like a dime among dollars.

I felt hot at the back of the neck. Quickly I stuffed the envelope into my inside jacket pocket. It made an uncomfortable bulge. I locked the box and returned it to the safe. Then I closed the safe door and again inserted the key in the lock. It would not turn, but as if a secret signal had been sounded in the messenger's brain he was by my side again and inserting his master key that enabled me to lock the safe.

"Everything satisfactory, sir?" he asked.

"Perfectly, thank you," I told him. I walked away and through the steel-lined rooms, through the enormous safe door and over to the elevator. Two minutes later I was above ground, breathing fresh air once more. I had just robbed a dead racketeer of a quarter of a million dollars, and the time was twenty minutes past ten.

My instructions were to go straight to the airport and catch the 10.55 plane. That suited me. I went into the street and looked for a cab.

The car that drew up at the edge of the sidewalk was long and green and opulent-looking. That was all I noticed about it. I was trying to catch the eye of a prowling cab-driver.

What I did notice as the door of the green car opened was the man seated in the back, and the wicked little Browning .32 he held balanced on his knee, half hidden by a handkerchief, the snout pointing straight at my stomach.

The man was Laurence Kinroy, and he said smoothly, "Please get in, Regan, and do not cause a fuss. I shall shoot you if you don't."

I climbed into the car, dropping on to the seat beside the accountant. Instantly the door slammed shut and the car slid away from the kerb.

I said: "You weren't taking any chances, were you? Think I might not go to the airport once I collected the cash?"

Kinroy smiled. He pocketed the tiny gun and replaced his handkerchief in his breast pocket. "Not at all. I felt sure you would go to the airport. That is why I intercepted you."

I shrugged. "Then why bother?"

"No bother at all, I assure you," he remarked. "Not now I

am sure you have the money, that is. You see, you are not going to the airport. You are coming with me."

I said: "Huh?" Then the truth slapped me at the back of the skull. "You mean this is a doublecross? That you're crossing up your pals?"

He said: "I see the general idea has penetrated your brain. You have a quarter of a million dollars on you. Why should they be shared?"

I whistled softly. "Brother, only an accountant's brain could have thought up that one. You must have been a tax commissioner at some time."

Kinroy laughed. "We're headed straight for the Mexican border. After that——" His hands made a careless gesture in the air.

The pit of my stomach stirred unpleasantly. I didn't let it dwell on the unfinished part of his sentence. Somehow it seemed to me that Laurence Kinroy would not be the type of person to leave untidy ends showing.

He said: "You might as well make yourself comfortable. We have a long drive ahead of us."

I nodded absently. My mind wasn't dealing with that part of the problem immediately. At the moment it was thinking: *I shan't show up at the airport, Steamy Voice will notice I'm A.W.O.L., and then he'll tell Crossen and Crossen will phone Middleburg.* Again my stomach made a nervous little leap.

Kinroy interrupted the thought session by holding out his hand. "Perhaps you should hand over the money now," he said. It was as casual as if he were asking for a small charity donation.

The Regan brain started functioning again on all six. I gave the chauffeur a look. He was on the other side of a glass partition so that unless the car was wired for sound it wasn't likely he could overhear our conversation, though I took it for granted he knew the set-up. All I could see of him was the back of a sleek black head. I wondered how much he would count.

Kinroy's voice grew a little more tense. "Hand it over, Regan."

I said: "Come and get it."

Reckless, that's the Regan family. Just plain reckless. Somewhere at the back of my mind a voice was telling me that if I let Kinroy get away with it for any length of time, the Crossen torpedoes would move into action in Middleburg, and I was more scared of that than Kinroy or his pop-gun. I couldn't be worse off if I called him now and got killed doing it. And neither could Susan.

Kinroy said: "I'm not joking, Regan. Hand it over."

"I don't have it," I answered, and edged my seat around a fraction so that I was facing him rather than sitting beside him. He noticed the movement and let his hand fall to his pocket.

That was what I wanted. I brought my right foot round in a scything kick that aimed at his wrist but actually connected with his left kneecap. He howled with pain and surprise, but it didn't prevent him from getting the gun out. I thought: *Death, where is thy sting?* and hurled myself across his legs, aiming at his right arm.

It was a bitter failure. He had the Browning out and dug it into my stomach. I twisted frantically, with the thought in my brain that getting shot in the stomach is just about the most painful way to die. The sharp cough of the little pistol was dulled by my body, but the shock of the explosion jarred me as the bullet tore at my clothes. Behind me the car window cracked into a spiderweb of glass.

There wasn't any pain. I thought: *All that talk about bullets in the stomach is so much hooey. Why, that one passed right through me and cracked the window.*

I thought that in the split fraction of a second which it took me to wrest myself away from the pistol and again jump at Kinroy's gun-hand—and this time with better aim. There was a faint smell of burning filling the car. Acrid smoke from the gun also tickled my nose.

I got my hands round Kinroy's gun wrist and yanked savagely at it. The Browning went off again and a bullet buried itself in the steel roof of the car. Then I had the gun and Kinroy, flabbily gasping, was back against the cushions, hands outstretched to ward off a further attack. The driver had the brakes hard on and was already opening his door to help in the battle.

I said: "Tell him to keep going, or so help me, Kinroy, I'll gut shoot you!" The pair of us were breathing hard. I think Kinroy was scared. I know I was.

I leaned across and pulled the partition window down. At the driver I barked: "Keep going, buster, if you don't want me to kill your boss!"

The driver took the hint. He stopped fiddling with the door, took his foot off the brake and let the car idle along the road.

But in that part of a second Kinroy had seized his chance. Throwing himself at the door, he flung it open and rolled out into the road. He hit the tarmac with a bang, half fell, then gathered himself together and made a running curve through the traffic,

watched by the curious stares of passers-by. The big car was already gathering speed; I could try a shot at him and have half San Francisco check my number plate and all the police in the county on my shoulder. Or I could let him go.

I shot a glance at my watch. It said 10.50. I had missed the plane.

I leaned over and closed the door. The driver grinned at me in the mirror. "What're you going to do now, clever boy?" he asked.

I suddenly realised I had been shot in the stomach. I put my hand across my belt, hoping there wouldn't be too much blood. There wasn't any, in fact. That was a puzzle, so I felt further around my person. It was then I realised the bullet had sliced across me and through my clothes, tearing a neat swathe out of the top of my pants but not harming me. My forehead was damp with perspiration as I passed my hand across it.

The driver said: "Not so good, eh, clever boy? You've let him get away."

"But I still have you," I said. "And I still have the car." I stuck the pistol in the back of his neck. "Let's suppose you stop this heap and get out and walk?"

He shrugged. "You have the gun, clever boy. Where d'you mean to turn me in?"

"I don't," I told him. "I have bigger fish to fry. Now stop the machinery."

He pulled over to the kerb and started to get out. I beat him to it. We stood on the sidewalk facing one another. He was a good head and shoulders shorter than I. He looked as though Kinroy had hired him for this special job. I didn't really care. I said: "Just get going and don't bother me. If you're wise you'll stay right out of sight a long time."

He was still grinning. "Clever boy, you made a deal. Take care of the car. It's hot."

I grinned back at him. "Thanks for the tip." He stood at the kerb, hands in pockets, as I pulled away into the traffic stream. I drove around the block until I spotted a drugstore with a telephone. Then I parked the car a little way down the street and walked back to the drugstore. I shut myself in the booth and called long-distance, asking for the number of Susan's aunt in Middleburg.

Auntie herself answered the call. I said: "Is Susan there?"

She seemed puzzled at the question. "Of course not. When she got your message——"

I snapped: "What message?"

"Why, the wire telling her to get back to Hollywood quickly as you needed her help on a new contract. She took the five o'clock plane out yesterday evening."

I said: "Oh yes, the wire. Yes, I see what you mean." We said one or two normal things about how Susan must have enjoyed herself, wished one another a happy Christmas, and then I hung up. I leaned against the wall of the booth and lit a cigarette. Crossen had been doubly clever; he had bluffed me one way and doublecrossed me the other. He was taking no chances.

Fifteen minutes later I was at the airport, having left the car to its fate and found a prowling taxi. Another twenty minutes and I was aboard a plane to Los Angeles. This time I wasn't in any mood to sleep.

Though I kept my eyes open at San Francisco Airport for Steamy Voice, and again at Los Angeles, there was no sign of him. Presumably when he lost me outside the Childers Building—I took it for granted I was under observation either by Steamy Voice or someone else from the moment I entered the safe deposit until I walked out—he decided I was playing the odds. In that case he would call Crossen and the word would go around to find me. But they would not expect me to return to Hollywood.

The other problem was Susan. My mind did some quick mental arithmetic. She would probably have landed at Los Angeles in the early hours. Then she would take a cab to her apartment. If I guessed right, there would be someone waiting for her there. And—still guessing—they would take her alive, otherwise there would not have been any point in bringing her back at all. Crossen had been in a hurry yesterday; he had concocted the scheme of threatening Susan to get me started on my unwilling way, then, with hours to spare, had arranged her kidnapping to ensure I kept to every portion of the deal.

At Los Angeles Airport I went straight to the telephone. When I got through to Peaceful Acres I asked for Robert Crossen.

The switchboard girl said: "Whom did you say you want, sir?"

I repeated the name. She said: "But there is no one here of that name. Are you sure you have the right number?"

I said it didn't matter, and hung up. Here was another puzzle. Crossen would want to reach me. I wanted to reach him. Yet he wasn't known at Peaceful Acres under the name, and I didn't intend to sit back and let him get to me while I was off guard. Stalemate.

Just on chance, I made another call to Susan's apartment. It

was a long shot, and like most long shots, it didn't come up. There was no reply, though I let the number ring for a considerable time.

I took a cab to my own apartment, and found everything exactly as I had left it. The drive-yourself Chevrolet was parked in the drive and there were no unseen marksmen concealed in the shrubbery. After a quick look around I returned to the Chevrolet and drove off to have some lunch.

My intention was to be seen around town. Hollywood is a village, and the people who are reasonably well known in it—are press agents tend to be—are spotted, written about, commented on, talked of and torn to pieces by the villagers. So I went to Romanoff's for lunch, made certain that everyone saw me there, by the simple process of talking to the latest and most notorious young feminine star, and then started on a round of the bars. In each bar I asked the same question of the bartender: "Do you know a man called Robert Crossen?" It didn't produce any answers in the affirmative, but I felt sure the word would get around.

Finally, when I had drunk as much orange juice as I could carry, I drove over to the Herald building and went up to the library. There I checked through the newspaper files for the past three or four days, and then drifted into the newsroom to find the lad on the sports desk who was engaged to Nancy, the library girl. His name was Ricky York, and he greeted me with a derisive cheer.

"Another press agent looking for work! Or are movies really better than ever?"

"The way television's cutting into the business, movies need me," I told him. "But it's not work I need, Ricky. I want information."

"The three o'clock at Santa Anita was won by——"

I stopped him. "Not that kind of information." I showed him a copy I had made of a news-item in the *Herald*. "Just a routine story—a character called Jed Nerance dies of heart failure in his apartment at Fifty-four Ocean Park Drive. He was a big man, according to Nancy. Any chance there's someone with a first-hand description?"

Ricky looked at the report. "Nancy told me you'd called. I think I might do better than just a description. The local man who went over to Nerance's apartment"—he paused—"obtained a picture. Just in case. It's on the file." He yelled for a copy boy and instructed the lad to find the morgue file on Nerance.

Within five minutes the picture was on the desk in front of me.

It was a head and shoulders studio portrait of a dark, rather classically-handsome man of about fifty or more. Not by any stretch of the imagination could he be considered to have borne any resemblance to the Bowery Boy.

Ricky York said: "He was fifty-eight, the coroner's inquest showed." He turned the picture over. The routine details were pasted on the back. "Fifty-eight, unmarried, died of heart failure, used to be a character actor on Broadway. Want anything more?"

I told him that would be enough, thanked him and made my exit. I had found what I wanted. If I had taken this trouble before, most of the mess in which I had found myself would easily have been averted.

Downstairs I found a pay phone and called Lynne Ransome's apartment. When I asked if I might come over, she said: "But I'm just getting ready to go out. Dale's calling for me and we're going out to dinner."

"This is important," I told her. "I shan't keep you long."

She gave in and I headed the car in the direction of her address. Now I had made this discovery about the Bowery Boy and the real Jed Nerance I knew it was time to call in Grimsdyke. To rely on my own ability to knock down Crossen was taking another long shot, and with Susan's safety at stake I had every intention of playing it safe. Grimsdyke and his squad could comb out Peaceful Acres in a matter of minutes in a surprise raid; alone, I shouldn't have a chance against the Crossen boys. Therefore I needed somewhere to lie low while Grimsdyke got organised. Lynne Ransome's apartment was the place.

She lived on the ground floor of a rambling old mansion up in Riverside Drive that had been converted into apartments. Either Lynne Ransome was the first tenant or the place wasn't letting too well, because her apartment was the only one showing curtains.

She opened the door wearing a blue woollen housecoat and blue mules. Her thick hair was tumbling about her shoulders.

She said: "I wondered what had happened to you when I called both your office and your apartment and couldn't get any answers" She stood back from the door. "Come in and make yourself at home. You don't mind my talking to you from the bedroom, do you? I'm getting ready in rather a hurry."

"I don't mind," I said. "But your boy friend probably will. He seems the jealous type."

She went into the bedroom, half closing the door. "Oh, he'll get over that. Where've you been?"

"In San Francisco," I replied. "Getting hold of a quarter of a million dollars."

Her head popped round the door. "You're joking?"

I showed her the envelope and part of its contents. "It was no joke. I'll just readdress this to the police and write a note explaining it while I tell you the whole sad story." I sat down at the writing desk and picked up the telephone. "But first I'll make a phone call, if you don't mind."

I tried Lieutenant Grimsdyke's office. He wasn't in, but his sergeant assured me the Lieutenant would be back in less than ten minutes. Anxious as I was to start things moving, it would do no good to try to explain everything to the sergeant and then again to Grimsdyke, so I left my number but said I would call in ten minutes, anyway.

Then, while I wrote down some of the details for Grimsdyke's record, I told Lynne Ransome of the events of the previous day—how I had been kidnapped and held prisoner in Peaceful Acres, how I had been forced to go to San Francisco and what had happened there, how I had discovered that the Bowery Boy, whom I had thought to have been dead at Peaceful Acres, was alive and kicking, exactly as Lynne had said.

"It was the oldest kind of trick, of course," I added. "I shouldn't have been fooled by it. They wanted to throw me off the Bowery Boy's trail, so they decided to make me think he was dead. Everything tied in nicely—a genuine corpse about the same size as Lannie Trask, and a perfectly normal death. So Lannie takes the place of this genuine corpse for two or three minutes while I view the body, holds his breath and kids me he's dead . . . and there you are."

Lynne's voice came from the bedroom. "But you said his face was icy cold."

"It was. But ether and menthol will produce that effect. And remember I was seeing Trask's supposed corpse in bad light and I was experiencing a shock because I was sure he was alive. For the length of time they had me with him, the illusion was perfect."

"I suppose so." The girl seemed puzzled. "But none of this explains why. You know what I mean—why all this happened?"

I said: "That's simple. Hal Greevey left his money in safe deposit boxes—your sister's was one of them. After his death his boys decided to get hold of it. They concocted this plan." I added: "Though I don't see why they operated from Peaceful Acres, nor where Alvar Domonici fitted in."

The front door buzzer broke in on me. Lynne called: "That's probably Dale—and I'm not dressed. Answer it for me, will you?"

I said: "This is probably where I get my face beaten in. For



pete's sake get your clothes on or young Atlas will think the worst again." I pushed the letter half under the blotter, leaving the envelope containing the money on top.

I opened the door.

The gun that rammed hard into my solar plexus, winding me and driving me backwards, was not in the hand of Dale Waecker. Behind the gun was the big fist of Lannie Trask, and behind him was Steamy Voice. Something about them seemed wrong, somehow.

They thrust into the apartment. I tripped over the carpet and sat down with a thump. I yelled: "Lynne! Get out through the window!"

Trask smacked me across the face with his fist. He growled: "Look in the bedroom, Griff." The thin man shot into the bedroom with the speed of a rocket while Trask stuck his .38 in my face. "One peep, pal, and you're cold turkey." There was the sound of a struggle in the bedroom, a frightened yelp from the girl, and then Griff returned, pushing her before him, while he held her wrists firmly behind her back with one hand and kept his other across her mouth. She still wasn't dressed—just panties, bra and stockings. The Bowery Boy laughed throatily. "You work fast, pal."

Griff's hissing voice had hate in it. "With the wrong girl, too. This why you ran out on me in 'Frisco?" He threw Lynne Ransome on to the floor beside me.

Trask looked round him. "That's odd. I figured the other skirt would be here as well." He jerked the gun downwards. "What happened to your own girl, pal?"

I asked: "You mean Miss Loxley? I thought she was in Middleburg."

He nodded. "Maybe you do think that. So I'll tell you, pal. We sent her a wire from you, telling her to come home. So she caught the five o'clock plane last night, and she should have reached L.A. this morning. Only she didn't arrive." He grinned. "So have you seen her, pal?"

I said: "You think I'd be here if I knew she was in Hollywood? Be your age, Lannie."

"That ties." He rumbled on. "Anyway, it don't matter now. We have you and we have the mazuma. Where is it, pal?"

I thought about the phone call I had made to Grimsdyke, about Dale Waecker who was soon to call for Lynne, about the telephone number I had left at police headquarters, about the envelope containing a quarter of a million dollars that was sitting on the

writing desk. Beside it, only partially covered by the blotter, was the note I was writing to Grimsdyke.

I said: "Over there. On the writing desk."

Griff moved again, as fast as ever. He had the envelope in his fingers and was brandishing it before Trask's eyes in a couple of shakes. But he was so fast he missed the note. My heart did a double loop and came back at twice its normal rate.

Beside me, Lynne said: "Now you have the money, I wish you'd leave."

Trask took the envelope from the thin man and stuffed it in his pocket. He said: "We're leaving. And so are you." Griff went to the window, more slowly this time, pulled aside the lace drapes and made a signal to someone waiting outside. I had expected this; both of us now knew too much to be left around. For the first time I realised what was out of place about Trask and the thin man. They wore black suits, white shirts and black ties. They were dressed as morticians assistants.

When the door buzzer sounded again I had a flicker of hope for a moment. But Griff went to open it, standing aside to let another two men enter, carrying something between them. The girl let out something that was a cross between a scream and a sob.

The two newcomers were also dressed in funeral black, and between them they bore a coffin.

While Griff closed the door, the two bearers set the coffin on the carpet beside me. I looked at it, guessing its purpose. Trask intercepted my glance, said: "That's it, pal. You're going out in that. A tight squeeze for the pair of you, but it'll be a quick ride." He nodded at the thin man. "Tie 'em up."

Griff produced a roll of medical adhesive tape from his pocket and knelt beside the girl. I said: "You could let her go. She doesn't know anything."

The Bowery Boy laughed deep in his chest. "Don't kid me, pal. Get on with it, Griff."

The thin man, his hands round the girl's ankles, said: "Nothing going to stop me, brother. I love my work." His voice was like superheated steam. While Trask stood over me with the .38 two inches from my forehead, Griff methodically taped the girl's wrists in front of her, then her legs above the knees, then her ankles. He finished the job by taping her arms to her body and added a strip of tape carefully across her lips. She didn't struggle; I think she was too frightened to move.

Meanwhile the other two men—one of them was the tough-looking chauffeur, I noticed—had unscrewed the lid of the coffin.

They lifted the girl by shoulders and feet and laid her on her side in the coffin. Then Griff turned his attention to me.

He was equally careful and methodical about the taping job on my person, although I had my doubts about his enthusiasm for the task, compared with what he had shown over Lynne. But I was scared, about as near to turning white in a few moments as I had ever been. These people were efficient. They didn't bungle. If they intended us for the high jump I had a pretty cold certainty we would get it.

In a matter of moments I was taped as prettily as the girl, and then the bearers gathered me up and placed me in the coffin by her side. We lay there back to back; it was a tight squeeze and I could feel every terrified vibration of the girl's body. I imagine I was doing some pretty good shivering on my own account.

The Bowery Boy leaned over us. "Don't get panicked, either of you. There's air holes in this box—you won't suffocate."

Then the lid banged on and darkness came inside our temporary tomb. I wished I could have uttered some words of encouragement to Lynne Ransome, but Griff had taped my lips together with the same ruthless efficiency he had displayed about the rest of the job. In any case, any comfort I could have given would have been false; I was under no illusions about this organisation allowing us ever to go free.

The coffin lifted, swaying fearfully in the air with the sickening motion of a light plane caught in a heavy gale. What was happening was that the four of them were carrying us on their shoulders out of the apartment and down the front steps of the house to what I presumed was a hearse outside. I found the airholes—tiny bores placed conveniently close to my nose. It would be stuffy inside the coffin, but we should be able to breath. But the sickening odour of the polished pine crowded over me, and I realised what it must be like for Lynne, trapped in the foetid confines of this box, unable to move or speak, fearful of where the journey might end.

I thought about Susan; if the Crossen organisation had not captured her, where was she? Was it possible she had escaped them by chance? Or had the Bowery Boy been lying when he said Susan was not in their hands?

I wondered about Grimsdyke. When I did not phone again, would he check the number? I had said nothing about urgency, so what reason would he have to follow through and—perhaps—find the record under the blotter? Even supposing he went to the apartment, would he spot that note?

The last remaining chance was Dale Waecker. He was stupid enough to kick up a fuss if Lynne was not at her apartment when he called. But how long before his fuss-making reached the right quarters? Grimsdyke would likely be the only policeman to connect the supposed disappearance of Lynne Ransome with the death of her sister days before.

The air in the coffin grew hotter, the atmosphere more oppressive. By now we were in the hearse and bowling along the streets towards our destination.

Gradually, the heat and the lack of air combined to make me sleepy. I fell into a drowsy state in which nothing mattered. They could do what they liked with us. I just didn't care.

The next thing I knew the lid of the coffin slid away and light flooded in on us. Better than light was the cool, fresh air which rushed at my nostrils. But with the air and the reawakening of my brain, returned all the terrors and fears of our position.

Blinking, I was lifted out of the coffin and placed on a stiff-backed chair. Lynne was left where she was, but with the stimulating effect of the air she awoke and struggled to sit up.

We were in what I supposed to be the main mortuary of Peaceful Acres—a large, rectangular room with white stone walls, lit by cold fluorescents high in the ceiling. No windows were apparent. Six high marble slabs, like altars, stood in the centre of the room; my stomach turned another loop when a body reclining on one of the slabs sat up and lowered its feet to the floor. But it was only the Bowery Boy, relaxing momentarily after his efforts.

A door opened and closed at the other end of the room, and Griff came in. He said: "Be down right away."

Lannie nodded. "Hell, they were heavy. I could use a drink." He walked over to me and tore away the gag. "This is where you end up, pal."

I took a deep breath. The air, sucked down into my lungs, tasted good, for all the smell of formaldehyde and coldness. I said: "Most people do."

Lannie looked around. "Guess you're right. It's just a little sooner for you, that's all."

The door opened again and Laurence Kinroy walked into the room. Behind him I could hear the hard man's voice, saying, "Somebody must have been a fool about the Loxley girl. It was plain stupid to let her give us the slip."

He came into view and I saw he was the man on the picture, the man who had written: "To Kay darling, with all my love for a lifetime."

I was meeting Mr. Hal Greevey, who was dead and buried at Peaceful Acres. He walked slowly towards me.

Lynne Ransome, struggling in the coffin, managed at that moment to force herself upright. Her eyes focused directly on Hal Greevey; I could read everything that passed through her mind but was held from her tongue by the tape which sealed her lips.

*That's Hal Greevey, she thought. But he's dead. I know he's dead. Yet he's here, walking towards me!*

The shock was too much. Still struggling, she overbalanced and fell backwards again, her bound feet threshing the air.

Greevey stopped in front of me. He shot a look at the girl in the coffin. Turning to Lannie Trask, he said: "Why did you have to bring her along?"

The Bowery Boy shrugged. "Hell—she was there when we picked up Regan. There wasn't anything else we could do."

"Pity." Greevey seemed genuinely concerned. To me he added: "Well, Regan, I told you not to doublecross me."

I looked at Kinroy. The big accountant stood a little to one side, behind Greevey. His face was a bland mask of smoothness.

I said: "Better ask Kinroy. He stopped me reaching the plane in San Francisco."

Greevey's eyes narrowed. He had wideset blue eyes, the sort you'd look into and decide that here was an honest man. He was tall and well-dressed, with wide shoulders that gave him the appearance of a football player. He certainly didn't look the part of one of the toughest characters in San Francisco's history, with a finger in every pie from slot machines to the call-girl racket.

I thought: *After this, never put your trust in faces, Regan. If there were any "after this".*

Greevey asked: "What do you mean by that?" Laurence Kinroy stood still, saying nothing. He seemed calm enough.

"What I said," I told him. "When I left the Childers Building, Kinroy was outside with a car—and a gun. He tried to take your quarter-million away from me, but I managed to stop him. Then he bolted. So I came back to Los Angeles and called you here. The switchboard girl said she had never heard of Robert Crossen. Maybe I should have asked for Hal Greevey."

It went home. A tiny pulse started ticking in his right cheek. His hard voice said: "Then you know who I am? You're not as dumb as I thought."

"I reached fourth grade in high school," I said. It wasn't just foolish bravado to make the crack; every moment of time I gained

from now on was another moment added to my score, and if that score went high enough there was just the odd chance one of my long shots would come up.

Greevey looked at Kinroy. The accountant seemed bored by the proceedings. Greevey said: "Well, Larry?"

"He's talking nonsense, of course," the accountant remarked. "I was at home last night—my staff will confirm that."

"Yes." The flat monosyllable betrayed neither belief nor disbelief. I had the feeling Hal Greevey would check, and check very carefully. He had stayed alive this long only by double-checking every single one of his associates. He went on: "Since you and Kay's sister are the only people outside my own organisation who know I am alive, you can see it's necessary you must both die. Making up stupid stories about Kinroy won't help you."

"There's no point in making up stories," I replied. "What I told you is the truth."

He said: "Could be." Turning back to the Bowery Boy, he added: "Well, I've seen them. To-night they must be got rid of. I'll leave that matter to you."

Trask rumbled: "Okay." Griff stepped forward to the coffin, looking at the girl. There was a nasty smile on his face. He passed his tongue quickly across his lips.

He nodded his head at Lynne Ransome, then looked at Greevey and asked: "Yes?"

Greevey shrugged. "It's none of my business. Just make sure they won't tell tales." He turned on his heel without another word and walked across the cold room. Kinroy followed behind, pausing only to shoot a glance at me that should have killed me stone dead. The door slammed behind them.

The Bowery Boy perched himself on one of the marble slabs. He said: "You've got a few hours, pal. Anything you want?"

"A cigarette." He produced a packet of Camels, stuck a cigarette between my lips and lit it. I inhaled gratefully. The thin man was still staring at the girl, who lay motionless, almost paralysed by the fierceness of his sunken eyes. I said: "You'll do me a favour, Trask, if you keep that bastard away from the girl."

Lannie Trask shrugged. "Griff is the boss's pet. I told you I wasn't the one that killed Kay Ransome."

The thin man said: "I'll take her with me." His long arms scooped into the coffin, gathered up Lynne, who hung, doll-like, in his grasp. I made a vain effort to struggle, and Trask's ham fist dug me in the chest, holding me back on the chair. Griff, carrying the girl, walked out of the room.

The Bowery Boy lit another cigarette for himself. He began to prowl around the room, idling his way between the marble slabs, touching one here, examining another there. He was obviously killing time. Presently he looked at his watch. About fifteen minutes had passed, fifteen minutes of sheer agony for me since Griff had left with the girl.

Trask said: "Think I'll get me a drink." He started towards the door.

"Give me another cigarette before you go," I begged. He changed his mind, produced the pack again and put a second cigarette in my mouth.

When it was alight he nodded, ran his fingers over my bonds, said, "You'll be safe enough," and left me alone. I was suddenly more grateful for that moment than anything in my life.

There were probably less than five minutes of grace allowed me. If it could be done. . . .

I wrenched my hands up to my mouth, holding the cigarette firmly against the edges of the medical tape. It smouldered, burning with an irritating slowness that churned my stomach like a millrace. If this failed, there would be no second chance. Trask would make certain of that. And every moment I delayed. . . .

The room was very quiet and cold. The only thing I could hear was the slight hiss of the fluorescents, above which my own breathing sounded like the roar of Niagara. The tape smouldered, and went on smouldering, while my wrists strained against it. A strand burned through, but there was another strand and another and another. I felt sick with fear of failure.

Then, suddenly, the last length of tape was burned through, and my wrists were free. Feverishly, I went to work on the tape that constricted my upper arms, my knees, my ankles.

And I was free.

I came off the chair fast enough to throw it to one side, so that it clattered to the stone floor with a noise like a thousand plates being smashed. My limbs felt stiff and cold, but at least I was able to move. Crouching, I ran behind the nearest marble slab, putting its bulk between myself and the door.

Then Lannie Trask returned.

He came into the room, saw the fallen chair, spotted the lengths of tape strewn across the floor, and uttered a low bellow of anger. His hand leaped to his pocket. I stayed motionless, waiting.

Trask rumbled: "Come on out, Regan!"

I waited, hardly daring to breathe.

He came across the room at a lumbering trot, headed directly

for the slab behind which I was hidden. Then, just before he reached it, the chair caught his attention again and he turned to it, stooping to pick up a length of the tape.

I slid away, curving round the slab to reach the next convenient hiding place.

Trask looked up, searching the room with his piggy eyes. He took a step forward, then paused, listening. Then he launched himself at the slab I had just vacated, peering over the edge and round the corners. But I was hidden from his view by the next piece of marble.

He began to walk slowly up the aisle between the slabs. In a moment he would pass by the one to the side of which I was crouching. I could hear his heavy tread crunching on the stone. His legs came into view, ridiculously clad in the solemn black cloth of the mortician's trade.

I jumped.

My arms went round his legs just below the knees in a football tackle that would have brought a light to the eyes of any coach. They contacted with the tree-trunk like form of the Bowery Boy at exactly the approved point at which he could be taken off balance.

He was. He swayed, turning on the ball of his right foot with his left leg struggling to regain balance. Then, with my arms lovingly encircling him, he crashed to the stone floor like a falling idol. The gun flew out of his hand, skittering across the room to fetch up with a *clang!* against one of the slabs. The weight of his huge body almost paralysed my arms so that for a second I could hardly move, but the Bowery Boy was in like shape, for the heavy fall had knocked the breath from him.

There wasn't any point in trying to fight him. He could have half-killed me. I disengaged, getting to my feet and sprinting for the gun. He scrambled after me, reaching out to grab my left ankle and pull me to the floor again. I kicked out with the other foot, feeling the heel crunch solidly into his eye and hearing his dull yelp of pain. But he still retained a grasp on my ankle that nearly crushed the bone.

There wasn't very much I could do about that except twist round and try to beat him over the head with my fist. It was like striking a steel shell. Meanwhile, his other hand was lashing out at my legs, the nearest part of me that was within reach.

He tried to sit up while retaining his grasp of my ankle. That was the unlucky move that fixed him. As he moved he mistakenly brought the back of his neck into position where I could hit him



—hard—with a rabbit punch. He grunted as my fist went home in the nape of his neck, and then quietly subsided on the floor and was still. I had to unpeel his fingers from around my ankle.

For the space of thirty seconds I sat on the stone floor, sobbing for breath. Then, still gasping like a wind machine, I crawled across to where the Bowery Boy's .38 lay against one of the slabs.

I had taken the first step.

The door opened at a touch and I found myself in a long, dimly-lit corridor, from the walls of which there issued a sense of damp and decay. I realised then that this part of Peaceful Acres lay underground.

To the left the corridor finished in a dead end. To the right it curved in a sharp bend left, so I padded along the stone floor, still trying to regain my breath—and at the same time expending more of it in running. There was no one in sight; everything was quiet, silent, deserted.

Once round the corner the underground passage split up into a short flight of stone steps, leading upwards, and another corridor in the walls of which were set copper plaques. I took a look at the nearest: it started off: "Here lies. . . ." There was no sense in exploring further, I considered.

Up the steps I went, to where a heavy steel door barred my way. But the door was apparently intended to repel intruders rather than to prevent the below-ground occupants from getting out; it was a somewhat grim thought, and again I didn't dwell on it.

Beyond the door stretched a further corridor, with this time small windows set high in the walls. Presumably this was the basement section under the mansion, with the mortuary two storeys below ground. As I entered this corridor there was a movement from the other end, and I froze, pressing against the wall.

Griff came into sight, hurrying towards me. My fingers sought the safety-catch of the .38; it was off, and I could be ready. But suddenly he turned left and entered a room, closing the door behind him.

I made my way along the corridor, pausing outside this room. Voices sounded from inside, one of them distinctly belonging to Greevey.

The hard man said: "He's got to go. Regan was telling the truth—I don't need to check on that kind of story. You can finish Kinroy as quickly as you like."

Griff's escape-of-steam voice drifted through the door. "What

you mean is you don't want Kinroy around any longer, so you're only too pleased to have something against him." There was a pause; I wondered how Greevey took that kind of direct challenge. Griff went on: "Don't ever think you can do the same to me, Hal. Just remember you'd have to do that job yourself."

Greevey said: "Don't be a fool. You're much too important, Kinroy has served his purpose—you can see that. Get rid of him."

"Softly," cut in the thin man. "Just take it softly. I'll get rid of him . . . but now? You know I'm busy." He chuckled. It sent trickles of icewater down my spine.

"The girl?" Greevey seemed incredulous. "Women will be your finish. She can wait. Deal with Kinroy and you can come back to her."

"That makes sense." There was the sound of movement. It was my cue to speed along the corridor towards the room which Griff had left in order to join Kinroy. But I could not reach there in time.

The thin man entered the corridor more quickly than I had anticipated. His sunken eyes caught sight of me and his right hand dipped to his pocket. I squeezed the trigger of the .38 and had the satisfaction of seeing him jump back into the room.

In that split second I was forced to make up my mind: to go into the room where I assumed Lynne to be, or to try to get out of this underground chamber of horrors.

I chose the latter course. Once in the room I could be smoked out in a matter of moments, but if I could only get above ground.

I raced down the corridor, past the room holding Greevey and his tame killer, dropping another shot into the closed door as I ran, just to ensure they kept their heads down. Then I was around the bend of the corridor, and ahead of me was another flight of steps with—the best sight in a hundred years—an open doorway to daylight. I hit the steps in a bound, leaping them three at a time as Griff turned the corner and fired a snap shot after me. The whine of the bullet burred at my ear as a piece of stone clipped from the ceiling above my head.

But I was at the head of the steps, and I had the door slammed against them. There was a lock in the heavy steel door, but no key in it. I was in a room which I took to be part of the above-ground offices of Peaceful Acres; filing cabinets lined the walls and a pair of desks stood at one side. I got my shoulders behind one of the desks, heaving it across the carpet into place before the door, just as Griff's footsteps sounded on the stone.

The breathing space I had was about three minutes, I calculated.

A telephone stood on the other desk, but when I lifted it, there was no answering voice. Apparently the switchboard girl had gone home.

I crossed the room at a run, finding myself in the entrance hall of the mansion. On my left, I remembered, was the morning room where I had first talked with Domonici. Ahead of me was the front door—and freedom.

And at that moment Laurence Kinroy, attracted by the noise, walked into the hall from the morning room.

He saw me, he saw the gun in my hand, and he stopped dead. For the first time his poker face registered an emotion, and that emotion was fear.

I said: "Kinroy! Stand still!"

He froze, watching me with a curious light behind his eyes. I ran up to him, jamming the gun into his ribs. "Back into the room." He obeyed, and I closed the door behind me, turning the key in the lock.

"You won't get away with it," he said quietly. By now he had recovered his composure and seemed ready to bluff his way through. But I had a card he didn't know about.

I said: "Whether I get away with it or not doesn't matter. The point is, I just heard Greevey give orders for you to be got rid of. You see, he decided he wanted to believe my story—because he's reached the conclusion that your period of usefulness is over."

Kinroy said nothing for a full thirty seconds. He seemed to be considering my statement, wondering whether to believe me or trust in his own luck staying. Finally he said: "What you say may be true—I half expected it. Do you have a proposition to make?"

I nodded towards the door. "I want out. Griff will be here in a few minutes, and I don't fancy being on the wrong end of his gun. So maybe you can cook up a deal." As I spoke, my eyes were casting around for the telephone. I found it, hiding coyly behind an antique pen-stand, but finding it didn't do me any more good than finding the other phone. It just wasn't answered.

There was a clatter of feet in the hall. Then Greevey's voice. "You might as well give up, Regan. The place is deserted and we have plenty of time to get you out."

I didn't answer. I was watching Kinroy. The accountant took a couple of steps backwards away from the door. I raised my voice in reply to Greevey.

"I'll do a deal with you. I have Kinroy. You can have him if the girl and I walk out of this place alive." Whatever his reply,

it need not be believed. But time was what I wanted—time for luck to balance on my side.

Kinroy whirled on me, his eyes blazing. I said: "Don't try it. I might kill you sooner than they will." My thumb jerked at the French windows. "They'll be round there in a minute or two, anyway."

He shook his head. "There's no way out. But there's bullets to fit that gun in this desk." He pulled open a drawer, laid a box in front of me. I put a couple of spare clips in my pocket.

Outside the room there was silence. Then Greevey again: "No deal, Regan. We have the girl. You're a sentimentalist—you wouldn't want her to die slowly, would you? Griff is an artist at that sort of thing."

The best answer to that was the one I gave him: two quick shots through the door. His curse told me they had not connected. I grabbed Kinroy by the arm, said: "Keep talking to me. Plead with me—do any damn thing you like. I'm going through the French windows and try to take 'em by surprise."

He nodded. For once in his life Laurence Kinroy had no good answer. He started to talk as I headed for the windows. He was saying, "Regan—for heavens' sake let me go—I haven't done anything to you—there's no reason for you to kill me—we could do a deal——" Then his voice became muffled as I slid behind the heavy drapes and opened the catch on the French windows.

I was out in the December evening, and creeping towards the front door, which was firmly closed. But the way to get a front door opened is to ring the bell. I stabbed the bell-push and moved swiftly to one side.

Then I heard Kinroy's yell: "Hal! Watch the front door!" In a last despairing gamble he was trying to save his own skin.

I ducked away from the door, heading across the drive in the direction of the parking lot. A flood of light streamed across the gravel.

And then Lynne Ransome's terrified scream reached my ears.

Immediately following the scream came Greevey's voice again. "I warned you, Regan. Come into the light or she'll go on screaming."

I dropped the pistol into my pocket and stepped into the half circle of light from the doorway.

Five minutes later we were back in the mortuary. Greevey was there, with Griff and the Bowery Boy, now recovered but still looking dazed. The girl, free now, leaned against the wall on my right; on my left stood Laurence Kinroy. The guns of Griff and

Lannie Trask menaced us, while Greevey stood a little to one side, smiling crookedly.

My action in pocketing the gun had also been in vain. The first thing Griff had done as I came under the threat of his gun was to frisk me. I shot a glance at Lynne Ransome; there was an ugly red mark at her throat.

Hal Greevey said: "You nearly made it, Regan. You're a tough man."

The Bowery Boy touched the back of his neck, rumbling in approval of the statement. Greevey went on: "This time we shan't make mistakes. Go ahead, Griff."

The thin man nodded. He looked at the three of us in turn, and again he licked his lips slowly. He said: "I haven't——"

Hal Greevey cut him short. "Your preoccupations with women nearly upset everything before. Let's get it over."

Beside me, Kinroy said: "But Hal—you're not—you won't——"

The gun in Griff's hand spat flame. Kinroy cried out, clutching at his stomach. He went slowly to the floor on his knees, still mumbling something. He rolled over, lying on his back and drawing his knees up to his chin. He said: "Please, Hal—*please!*"

Griff laughed. "Die slow, you bastard," he hissed. His eyes turned to me. The girl gave a sob at the back of her throat, closed her eyes and slid gently to the floor.

Kinroy said again, "Kill me—please, Hal—kill me!" Greevey nodded, and again Griff's deadly gun barked. This time the accountant stopped moaning, and there was quiet in the room again, with the acrid smell of cordite reaching to our nostrils.

"That's the way it is, Regan," said Greevey coldly. He turned away. Griff raised his gun once more, and its vicious snout pointed directly at the top of my waist belt. I thought: *so now you know, chum, and this is where you get to know everything . . . or nothing at all.*

I thought about the days in Middleburg, and how I had first come to Hollywood, and all the fun and laughter and excitement there had been since then. I thought about Susan and whether she would miss me after I was gone. I thought, oddly enough, about the alleged comedian I was publicising, and how, when this happened in his pictures, the gun jammed or the ceiling fell in on the villains or something equally improbable happened. I knew exactly the sort of stupid remark his six gag-writers would make him say when the villain squeezed the trigger and nothing happened.

"Missed!" he would say, and pull a funny face.

Griff started to squeeze the trigger. There was an expression of pure joy in his sunken eyes.

I heard the crack of the pistol.

Nothing. There was no puff of blue smoke at the business end of Griff's gun. I felt no sudden hammerlike pain in the pit of my stomach as the bullet tore through my intestines. All that happened was that Lynne Ransome, who had apparently come out of her faint just before Griff decided to turn his gun on me, let out a wild yell and lashed out with her feet at Greevey.

Then I realised it wasn't Griff's gun at all which had snapped off. Because over his vicious face came a look of sheer astonishment, as his fingers relaxed and he dropped the pistol with a clatter on the stone.

Over his shoulder, by the door, I suddenly saw Lieutenant Grimsdyke with a smoking police .38 in his hand and his other hand pushing open the door as hard as he could.

Griff began to turn around as though to speak to the detective. Then, like Kinroy, he buckled at the knees and went to the floor at my feet. He didn't say anything, didn't do anything more. He just died.

From the moment when Hal Greevey had said, "That's the way it is, Regan," until now had occupied less than five seconds.

Then everything seemed to happen. The room seemed full of police—big, tough, beautiful cops with guns in their hands. A lot of noise broke out all at once. The Bowery Boy dropped his .38 and stood quite still, apparently more willing to chance the gas chamber than to try to shoot his way out. But Greevey came to life with surprising suddenness, bending double and hareing for the door with his right hand tearing for the gun in his pocket.

With all that artillery surrounding him, he didn't have a chance. About four guns barked at once, and Greevey seemed to stop in mid-flight and heel over backwards, as the bullets creased into him.

The next thing I knew, Lynne Ransome was on her feet and throwing her arms around my neck. And at that moment the flash-gun of a *Herald* photographer, who had somehow managed to creep into the police party, went off full in my face.

Lieutenant Grimsdyke leaned across the desk and snapped his lighter at my cigarette. He tapped the open newspaper in front of me.

"Brother," he remarked with feeling, "are you going to have trouble explaining that away."

The picture was a good one. I was backed up against the mortuary wall at Peaceful Acres. Stretched at my feet with his right hand pointing to my toes in what looked like a gesture of supplication, was Griff. Hanging around my neck with a look in her eyes that the camera-gun had translated into "My hero!" but was actually nothing more than sheer terror, was Lynne Ransome, still wearing only her scanties, which I realised were very scanty indeed, now I had time to notice them.

The caption read: "Press agent dares all—Mackenzie Regan, Hollywood publicist, was in at death on Peaceful Acres murder jamboree."

I closed the paper and shook my head. "Not me, chum. Susan trusts me."

He said: "I'm not thinking of Susan. I'm thinking of Lynne Ransome's boy-friend. Have you seen him?"

The thought didn't appeal to me. I put it aside and passed on to another topic. "Let's worry about that young Goliath later. What I want to know is—just where is Susan?"

Grimsdyke smiled cheerfully at me. "This is one time you didn't know any of the answers, isn't it? It's restored my faith in the police department." He ran his finger gaily across the desk. "Susan, my dear Mack, is at present on her way here from Middleburg. She should arrive in exactly ten minutes time."

I said: "All right. You can stop being mysterious. This time I've come unstuck and you've made all the right moves. But I've had a good night's sleep with half a pint of phenol-barbitone inside me and I'm ready for anything."

His hand moved in a gesture that meant, *Nothing to it, really*. He said: "You started it for me, Mack."

I tapped my chest. "Little me?"

"No one else. Remember the morning after you and Domonici got mixed up in that car smash? I said at the time that there ought to be some connection between Hal Greevey being buried at Peaceful Acres and Domonici wanting to be your client just after Greevey's girl had been shot to death. Then I remembered you and I had talked about all those cases of grave robbery."

I pointed my cigarette at him. "If you're going to tell me you had one of those brilliant flashes of intuition. . . ."

"No intuition." He shook his head. "Just a case of good, solid, honest police work. I had San Francisco start digging into Greevey's death, and I found out he died very suddenly and very conveniently just as the Federal tax boys started probing. What's more, he didn't leave many solid assets—an odd thousand or two,

but nothing that was worth anything. So where did that money go, I wondered?"

"Some of it into Kay Ransome's safe deposit box, and the rest in Greevey's box under the name of Robert Crossen," I said.

He chalked an imaginary medal in the air with his finger. "Smart boy. And you had told me Kay Ransome was once Greevey's girl—and now she had been murdered." He paused. "So I checked on the doctor who had signed Greevey's death certificate. He turned out to be a drunk who owed money in one of Greevey's out-of-town gambling joints. Then I decided to put a tail on you, because you seemed so closely tied up with Domonici yet you weren't anxious to tell me anything."

I said: "You mean I was followed all the way to San Francisco?"

"No. That's where we came unstuck." This time he had the decency to relax his expression of smugness. "The tail lost you that afternoon Greevey and his gunman kidnapped you in your own apartment—that was a smart piece of work. By the time we picked up anything again you were back in town and showing yourself off in all the bars you could find."

"Drinking orange juice, I might add," I told him primly.

"It's your poison," Grimsdyke said. "Point is, we only knew you were back in town because we got a tip from a barman who also happens to be a stoolie. We didn't know where you were headed. But I was pretty sure something was up because Susan had called me the previous evening from Middleburg, complaining she had tried to raise you at the office and your apartment, and asking why you'd sent her a wire to return. So I told her to head straight for the local police headquarters and I arranged for one of our girls to take her place—that's why Greevey's boys lost track of her."

I said: "You'll be remembered in my will for that one."

He grinned. "I should accept your overdrafts. . . . Then you called me from Lynne Ransome's apartment—remember? Only I wasn't in, and by the time I called back the number wasn't answering. I went straight round there and found that Dale Wacky character just about nuts because one of the neighbours had told him they were sure a coffin had been taken out of the girl's apartment." His forefinger pressed into the desk. "That clinched it. I knew something was wrong with Peaceful Acres, but I didn't know what. I went through the room with a fine tooth-comb, and I found your half-finished note. So I talked a tame Judge into giving me an order to examine Hal Greevey's tomb and went straight up there."



"And saved the Regan life," I said. "Grimmie, I love you."

"It's all part of the service," he replied. "The rest of the story came from Lannie Trask, after we grilled him at headquarters. And it explains why four graves have been robbed of their rightful occupants in the past year."

I nodded. "I think I had an idea of that the moment I knew Trask was really alive, although Kinroy and Domonici had tried to make me believe he was dead. Only I couldn't pinpoint it, exactly." I lit another cigarette, leaned over the desk. "The set-up was for Hal Greevey and his boys to disappear while the income tax heat was on, and then to reappear as entirely different people. But disappearing isn't so easy unless you're dead—or everyone thinks you are dead."

Grimsdyke made another imaginary medal in the air. "Go to the top of the class. What Greevey did was to arrange his own death and have another body buried in his place. We haven't got around to checking fully yet, but I'll guarantee that something very similar happened to Lannie Trask and Griff and that tough chauffeur. After all, it's like murder—if no one suspects anything, there's no reason to look for foul play. Only in this case Greevey and his boys were murdering themselves, which meant only they were likely to start any inquiries. They had previously bought into Peaceful Acres through Kinroy, and from then on it was easy to have those graves robbed and the bodies buried as their own."

He flicked ash off his cigarette. "Robbing the graves was a final touch of artistry, as I see it. A lesser man than Greevey would have had a load of stones buried in his place, but he was bright enough to realise that a skeleton in a coffin might be anybody's skeleton, provided there's no serious reason for a close check."

I said: "Poor Domonici. He said he needed their money. I wonder why he called me in, in the first place."

Grimsdyke shrugged. "He was trying to do two things at once—run an honest business and keep a hide-out for the Greevey gang. I can imagine how Greevey took it when he heard that Domonici had enlisted the services of the Press agent who was to have some connections with Kay Ransome's sister." He added: "Of course, when Lynne Ransome got the lawyers to open her sister's safe deposit box and came to you with the money, it made things tough for Greevey."

My forehead wrinkled. Grimsdyke was getting beyond me. "Explain, please."

He smiled his pepsodent smile. "Just good police work again. Kay Ransome lived well—too well for a singer. The obvious deduction is she was using some of the money in her safe deposit box—quite probably she knew Greevey wasn't dead and she saw a chance of cashing in. So Greevey got mad and sent Griff to kill her. Then the sister discovered the money and went to you with Trask on her trail. I expect Trask just seized his opportunity when he realised there was still plenty of cash left."

I struck my brow with my hand. "Oy, oy! From now on I stick to Press agenting."

Grimsdyke said: "I wish you would." The telephone shrilled and he picked it up. Then he added: "Hullo, Susan. Yes, he's here. Yes, you can talk with him." He handed the phone to me.

I said: "Hello, darling. Nice to hear you." I really meant it.

Susan's voice sounded like chilled ice. "You've been getting into trouble again, Mack Regan," she said. "If I hadn't called Lieutenant Grimsdyke. . . ."

I said: "Yes, I know. But it wasn't really my fault. . . ."

She cut in on me. "Mack Regan, I have just bought a copy of the *Herald*. There's a very revealing picture of you on the front page. Very revealing indeed. I didn't know you were such a wolf."

I said: "Susan, I can explain all that. I——"

She broke in again. "I'd rather not have explanations. I'm getting straight into a cab and I'll meet you at Romanoff's. This is going to cost you one very expensive dinner, and then afterwards we're going to look at those very expensive diamond rings in that shop along Sunset . . . darling." This time she had the good grace to chuckle. "Mack Regan, I've got you just where I want you. See you in ten minutes."

I said, "Yes, darling," and hung up. Grimsdyke was grinning all over his face.

He said: "If you're going to meet Susan, you'd better go out the back way. Lynne Ransome's boy friend is waiting in the front office." He held out his hand. "Brother, I said you'd have some explaining to do!"

THE END.

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